

A Phenomenographic Study on On-reserve First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Students' Experiences  
in a One-year College Transition Programme

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## ABSTRACT

### **A Phenomenographic Study on On-reserve First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Students' Experiences in a One-year College Transition Programme by Charmaine Condappa**

In an age when access to higher education is expanding, the literature shows that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) students are underrepresented. Those who manage to enter university experience challenges that hinder their success. Consequently, transitional programmes have been set up to support FNMI students as they move from high school to higher education institutions. To better understand the challenges of transitioning, I decided to embark on a phenomenographic study that explores six on-reserve Canadian FNMI students' conceptions of their learning experiences in their community college. In addition, the study also examines two of their teachers' perceptions of the students' experiences as they prepared them for university.

My relationship with these students and teachers began when I started work as a high school science teacher on a Canadian reserve in northern Canada. Coming from a culture sharing many similarities with Canadian First Nations, Metis, and Inuit, I developed a strong student-teacher bond with the students. I experienced first-hand that FNMI learners achieve positive academic outcomes when they share close relationships with their family, and are guided by teaching-learning frameworks that resonate with them as indigenous people (Battiste, 2002; Tharp, 1988). As I listened to their voices describe their approaches and the conceptions of their learning on their journey through the on-reserve college transition year programme, a vivid picture is painted of the challenges that they faced during this transition.

Course choices were limited and students' approaches to learning was influenced by the absence of a culturally and academically engaging curriculum that incorporated FNMI ways of learning and pedagogical practices. In addition, the lack of institutional resources alongside instructional strategies that do not embrace the physical, mental, social, and emotional attributes of learners, might have influenced the surface approaches adopted by some students. Moreover, it was unclear how the institution intends to achieve the overall goal of helping students' successful transition into postsecondary when programme resources are limited. There is a mismatch between the purpose of the transition programme as defined by the institution, and the purpose as defined by the students.

The findings also show that some students adopted approaches to learning that do not define or characterize who they are as learners, but instead reflect how they coped with teaching and learning in their environment. These approaches, conceptualised in phenomenography as surface and deep approaches, are not truly the way that FNMI are as learners. Surface and deep approaches do not mirror the cultural perspectives and holistic experiences evident in an indigenous view of learning. The surface approach (learning as primarily reproductive) refers to those who see learning as based on that, which is extrinsic to the real purpose of the task. By contrast, the deep approach (learning as primarily seeking meaning) is associated with students' intentions to understand and engage in meaningful learning, focusing on principles, and using strategies that are appropriate for creating meaning.

The conclusion is that although the deep-surface distinction is used in analysing the approach the students adopted, and the learning outcomes; in this study, I argue that students' voices indicate that such distinctions are not adequate in explaining FNMI students' approaches to learning. The gap in knowledge is that the model of deep and surface approaches is limited in its scope, and cannot fully explain what is truly important to the on-reserve FNMI learners in the areas of location and relationship. Based on their voice; norms, beliefs, and values appear to be far more related to completing the TYP within the community rather than completing tasks. Achieving success entails passing all the course outcomes in the community college on the reserve where they have the support of their family and community. The model

of deep and surface approaches to learning does not mirror the cultural perspectives and holistic experiences evident in an indigenous view of learning.

The underlying problem might not be so much to do with student learning, but with the environment through which the learning unfolds. The voices of the students spoke. Caring relationships, strong engagement of teachers with the students, and the community can result in a shared sense of purpose. Therefore, it is important to understand FNMI values and needs when creating learning environments that will promote academic success in transitioning to the postsecondary level, and beyond.

**Keywords:** Conceptions of learning, Phenomenographic approach, On-reserve First Nation, Métis and Inuit, On-reserve Aboriginals, Transition programme, Postsecondary, K-12 to Postsecondary Education, K-1

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In our every deliberation,

We must consider the impact of our decisions

On the next seven generations.

Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy

The transition from secondary school to higher education is a critical stage in the educational journey of any student who aims for the best professional options and opportunities that schooling has to offer. Any high school graduate who takes the next step to pursue education beyond secondary level soon realises that it is a substantial adjustment that may prove to be very demanding, and perhaps even frustrating. The challenges that accompany the transition experience include adjusting to a new academic environment, adopting a self-directed approach to learning, developing a new relationship with teachers, and remaining motivated and focussed as s/he works towards their desired goal (Keating, Davis, & Holden, 2006).

This study explored the experiences of First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) students to highlight the challenges they faced transitioning from high school to postsecondary education. Based on my experience as a teacher, and my interactions with FNMI students, they recognise that postsecondary education has the capacity for personal and community building but experience challenges in transitioning from high school to university. Even in Canada, where opportunities exist for learners from different backgrounds, racial and ethnic disparities caused by the intergenerational impact of colonialism have always meant that postsecondary opportunities are elusive for Canadian Indigenous people (Battiste, 2002; Holmes, 2006; Joseph, 2015, Mendelson, 2008; Preston, 2008). Therefore, supporting postsecondary education for this



population not only helps their families, but it also impacts on one's socio-economic status in Canada (Assembly of First Nations, 2012; BC Teachers' Federation, n.d.; Mendelson, 2006).

### **Who are Canada's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples?**

The term First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) peoples is used interchangeably with persons reported to being of autochthonous or Indigenous descent. Under the Canadian Constitution, Indigenous peoples are registered under the Indian Act of Canada as members of First Nations or Indian band as outlined in the Constitution Act, 1982, section 35(2) (Statistics Canada Demographic Division, 2006). According to the 2016 census, nearly 1.7 million people (4.9 percent of Canada's total population of approximately 32 million) identified as FNMI. First Nations make up 5.6%; Metis comprise 1.4% and Inuit 0.2%. About 47% of FNMI people live in urban communities, and 53% in areas of legally reserved land called reserves. These are locations designated by the Government of Canada under the regulations of the Indian Act of Canada. Those living on the reserves are referred to as 'on-reserve' while those living in urban communities are 'off-reserve' (AAND, 2009; AFN, 2012; Bombay & Hewitt, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2006).

According to the 2011 National Household Survey of Canada, there were 3,100 reserves in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). These FNMI reserves, usually located in rural areas towards the North of Canada, vary in size and, under the Indian Act their governing body known as the Indian Band Council. The council usually consists of one chief and several councillors (Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 2010) rules them. Under the Indian Act, statutory provisions for funding elementary and secondary education are provided by the federal government.

However, funding arrangements for First Nations-controlled postsecondary institutions, are not generally upheld particularly if they are located on reservations (Stonechild, 2006).

This study presents the experiences of on-reserve FNMI learners and their teachers living on a rural reservation in Northern Canada, around 1,000 km from the province's capital. The reserve has a population of approximately 3,000 and 850 students enrol in school there. Despite the lack of policy support for postsecondary institutions on reserves, there is one community college that delivers the college Transition Year Programme (TYP) as well as other postsecondary apprenticeship curriculums.

### **Background and Problem Statement**

Since there are no universities on the reserves, FNMI students who would like to access university education have to leave their communities. For those FNMI students just leaving home, university often represents an environment that is impersonal and hostile to their culture, traditions and values (Kirkness & Bernhardt, 1991). For example, when groups of FNMI students do not readily adapt to the modus operandi of the institution, the typical response is to intensify efforts to socialise them into the institutional social environment. Adapting means that students – who are usually miles away from family support – must embrace a new form of consciousness and orientation foreign to the views they have of the world (AFN, 2012; Holmes, 2006). Often, non-indigenous people are ignorant of FNMI culture and traditions while consciously and unconsciously exercising institutionalised racism towards them (Bear Spirit Consulting, 2007; Ly & Crowshoe, 2015). Findings from the-exploration of several transition programmes conducted internationally and across Canada, show that FNMI students in postsecondary institutions face potential barriers such as racism and stereotyping. This makes it

even harder for high school students transitioning into universities (Wesley-Esquimaux & Bolduc, n.d.).

Studies have shown that transitioning into postsecondary is more challenging for Canadian indigenous students compared to their non-indigenous counterparts (AFN, 2012; Holmes, 2006; Wesley-Esquimaux & Bolduc, n.d.). In addition, the number of Canadian FNMI students who achieve a postsecondary education continues to lag behind that of the general population. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) highlighted that even those students who completed high school still found university to be beyond their reach because their skills, course completions and grades might not satisfy university entry requirements. Though the Royal Commission report was undertaken more than two decades ago, the idea that some students were not successful in the transition programme required examining to explore and identify those issues hindering students' success.

While 32% of the non-indigenous population attain a university education, it is not so for those among the indigenous identity group. In 2016, the FNMI identity groups older than 25 years with a university degree increased to 10%, 13%, and 5% respectively while those living on reserves are only 4.7% (Statistics Canada, 2018). These statistics show that although the numbers of FNMI gaining degrees is rising, the rate at which they are being awarded them is significantly lower than the non-indigenous population.

It is important to note that a significant number of FNMI who complete high school do go on to pursue non-university postsecondary or university degrees at a later date (Bear Spirit Consulting, 2007; Mendelson, 2006). Some delay their postsecondary education due to family commitments or financial constraints, while others pursue apprenticeships and trades before their university degrees. It should be clear to readers that this thesis is about FNMI high school

graduates transitioning to postsecondary education immediately after graduation with the aim of pursuing a degree. Indeed, Transition Year Programmes (TYPs) were created to support students in making a successful transition to university.

In Canada, TYPs are transformative eight months-long support programmes designed to complement high school skills so that learners who wish to continue to postsecondary studies are better prepared to do so. According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) (2013), some students may not have the formal qualifications to enter a faculty through regular admission route, therefore, TYPs provide access with a wide variety of services and support in terms of academic support, and personal coping skills. Although they exist for all groups of students, such as those with disabilities, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer (LBGTWQ) communities, African-Canadians, and Indigenous students, most TYPs are designed by universities specifically for FNMI students and offer development programmes to help them meet the academic requirements for admission into university faculties (Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002; Mendelson, 2006; Kirkness, 1999). According to Palmieri (2016), from a Canadian university perspective, TYPs are full-time university programmes for first-year FNMI students who do not meet all of a given university programme's entry requirements. High school graduates and other mature students who are admitted into the TYP take a combination of degree credit courses, and tutorials along with academic workshops in a supportive community environment. After successfully completing the TYP courses in eight months, the students are qualified for a degree programme at a given university.

Most college TYPs are located on the campuses of universities across Canada, such as the University of Alberta, the University of Manitoba, and the University of Toronto. To ensure that a higher percentage of FNMI students succeed in completing their degrees, Canadian

universities work in partnership with Elders and Indigenous counsellors, to offer programmes and services that are meant to be relevant to FNMI students from smaller and rural communities (AUCC, 2013). These services may be located at a central site on university campuses, but in this case, it is found on a remote reserve situated hundreds of miles away from the nearest university.

TYPs situated on the reserves are designed to increase students' access to postsecondary education by offering first year support to the students living on the reserves. They offer courses that are administered by staff from both the university and the community to eliminate the necessity for students to change geographical location and experience discrimination, variables that contribute to social barriers that affect profoundly the high school graduate transitioning into postsecondary education (AFN, 2012). Providing an environment where the FNMI students living on the reserve do not feel alienated and lonely as they qualify for postsecondary education is a substantial part of supporting their transition from high school to university.

TYPs also address the systemic barriers inherited from a legacy of colonialism and residential schools, the latter reflecting ways of teaching characteristic of a western pedagogy. Its sequential, behavioural approach to teaching and learning, whereby skills follow linear paths and, for Indigenous learners, content was largely abstract (Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Yunkaporta, 2007). Indeed, FNMI culture and learning styles were ignored for generations (Hilberg & Tharp, 2002), resulting in a widening in the education gap between the non-indigenous and FNMI learner. This argument implies that instructional strategies among other factors might not be harmonious with indigenous ways of knowing, thereby creating barriers.

The consensus among universities is that to close the gap by instituting TYPs (AUCC, 2013) seems to be the correct thing to do to help those FNMI students who wish to acquire a

university education by assisting them to reach the standard to which they are entitled. Offering programmes and services such as a TYP tailored to the needs of the FNMI learner will allow them to transition into postsecondary education, while remaining connected to their identity, and building a sense of community. This can make a significant difference in their ability to be successful in university. The literature suggests that FNMI students need to feel they are able to transition with ease, with the proper academic guidance, and without judgment (Wesley-Esquimaux & Buldoc, n.d.). Meanwhile, Alderman, Taylor, and Nelson (2013) refer to first year transition support as an early “dropout prevention” strategy (p. 43). The problem could be that the TYP in this study may not be meeting its goal of helping the growth of postsecondary completion of on-reserve FNMI students. However, it might be possible to increase its effectiveness by putting in place the academic support that the students need, thereby creating innovative study courses relevant to the indigenous students or offering services that meet their needs. Therefore, in this thesis, the educational experiences of FNMI high school graduates transitioning into postsecondary education were explored in order to capture facets of the learning experiences through these students’ eyes as well as their teachers’ perceptions of such experiences. Understanding the different ways in which the students experience their college transition programme could thus assist in addressing the barriers in the system that might be preventing more indigenous students from embarking on postsecondary education.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the study was to explore FNMI students’ conceptions of their learning experiences in an on-reserve college TYP as well as highlighting the teachers’ perceptions of their programme experiences using the phenomenographic approach to analyse the learning approaches. The perceptions that teachers communicated about how the students

conceived of their learning might or might not be supported by the students' own accounts of these experiences. In the study, FNMI learners and their teachers living on a rural reservation in North Canada – around 1,000 km from the province's capital – represent the participants. To guarantee anonymity and to respect the privacy of the individuals involved in this research, pseudonyms were used for the actual names of the places, institutions, and the participants.

The rural reservation where the study was carried out will be called 'Kiwetin,' meaning 'the north' where under the Indian Act a band leader (Chief), and councillors are elected by the people to govern and conduct their affairs in the best interest of the citizens. In the community, there is one elementary and one high school, as well as a community college for vocational studies, Askihk Community College (a pseudonym). It also serves as the institution where the students transitioning to university pursue the college TYP, which is conducted daily for high school graduates who aspire to attend university.

According to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Askihk Community College, the transition programme in 2011 was to eliminate the necessity for high school graduates to leave the community right after graduation to pursue university education. More information about the college is detailed in Chapter 3.

### **Researcher's Motivation for Conducting the Study**

My inspiration for this research came while working on the reservation with various groups of FNMI learners whom I grew to cherish as individuals and who valued my time with them in the classroom. As an emigrant from the Caribbean it was my perseverance and hard work that was instrumental in getting me employed as a teacher in Canada. As a minority, I had to work twice as hard as a given Canadian citizen to enjoy the same benefits. I was able to use

my life story to encourage and motivate my FNMI learners to work hard, graduate from high school and continue on to postsecondary education.

I understood that after high school the most important link to university for these students is the on-reserve community college. It plays a crucial role in their lives since it offers the opportunity to gain access to postsecondary education through its college TYP. If a student on the reserve did not succeed in the transition programme, he or she may take years to access a university degree. The college TYP has the opportunity to provide transformative change to these indigenous students, which will eventually reach out into the community and beyond.

I was concerned that not all of these FNMI students, who graduated from high school and displayed the potential to perform well academically at the postsecondary level, felt that they were successful in the TYP. Although the college TYP has the opportunity to provide transformative change to these indigenous students, somehow it was not meeting their needs as students. To explore the possible reasons why these once enthusiastic students who enrolled in the TYP were not all successful, I designed this research with the understanding that those who are most closely involved in educational practice, together with the students for whose benefit these policies were established, are often left out of decisions about what is regarded as 'quality' education. I wanted to give the students 'a voice' (Anton, 2000; Battiste, 2000; Neeganawedgin, 2013) as I construct new forms of knowledge using an approach based on its potential to challenge the power relations between researcher and the researched. By exploring their learning experiences as well as highlighting their teachers' perceptions of their experiences, I wanted the voices of the students to be heard regarding what is making them successful or unsuccessful in the transition programme. Highlighting these students' experiences in the TYP illuminated why these once successful students in high school were unsuccessful in the transition programme.



### **Primary Research Questions**

The study addressed the following questions:

1. What are on-reserve FNMI students' conceptions of their learning experiences in the college TYP at an on-reserve community college?
2. What are college TYP teachers' perspectives on FNMI students' experiences in the programme at the on-reserve community college?
3. What do FNMI students believe is making them successfully or unsuccessfully complete the college TYP at the on-reserve community college?

### **Rationale and Justification of the Study**

Transitional programmes are meant to support students and provide them with the knowledge and skills required for postsecondary education. However, I noticed that not many students successfully complete the transition programme and enrol for university. It is important to gain some insights regarding students' experiences in the transitional programme. I often ask myself why some of my students successfully complete the transition programme whereas some do not, despite having completed high school and being willing to enrol for postsecondary education. Hence the need to provide students with an opportunity to share their experiences in the transition programme. By exploring the educational experiences of six FNMI graduates transitioning into university and their teachers' expectations for, and beliefs concerning their learning, I was able to better grasp the challenges faced by students in on-reserve TYPs. This thesis seeks to better understand the factors that keep the on-reserve high school graduates

motivated to complete the TYP programme and enrol at university. To succeed in the programme means that the students have to complete and obtain a passing grade on all programme courses. In addition, they should also possess the academic skills and self-motivation necessary to persist and progress in university and beyond. The reason for this study is to gain some insights concerning students' experiences of the program, and possibly identify why TYP on the reservation might not be meeting the goal of enabling these students to transition successfully to Canadian universities.

TYPs are expected to help FNMI students to gain access to university by providing social and academic support programmes to facilitate the transition process from high school to university (Goff, 2011). The first three years of the on-reserve TYP at Askihk Community College resulted in not all students making the transition to university. Since the intention of the TYP is to improve postsecondary matriculation of on-reserve FNMI students, educators should know what to focus on to assist the student in achieving the steps necessary in the transition process. It is believed that exploring students' conceptions of their experiences in the TYP programme and their teachers' understanding of such experiences can illuminate how best to improve the programme and support the students.

The academic difficulties experienced by many FNMI students in Canada have been well documented but there is not a substantial body of research or literature that examines on-reserve FNMI students' experiences and conceptions of learning in a transition programme. Literature concerning FNMIs in postsecondary education in Canada includes Favell (2013), who studied how music and arts can be used to improve FNMI postsecondary programmes. Hill-MacDonald (2011) has examined how web-based resources in Ontario are used to support FNMI students transitioning to postsecondary education, and Parent (2009) who studied the perceptions and

experiences of FNMI youths in a community-based programme in Vancouver. Meanwhile, Lakehead University has examined studies and research across Canada and internationally to identify what students believe has most engaged them during both their postsecondary schooling and personal academic experiences (Wesley-Esquimaux & Buldoc, n.d.). In addition, the Assembly of First Nations (2012) has detailed the factors affecting Canadian Indigenous learners transitioning to postsecondary education and the initiatives required to support a successful transition.

Instead of relying on what we think we know about the students, we can derive an understanding of how students experience the programme by deconstructing the TYP students and teachers' various experiences and conceptions of learning on a reserve. If educators understand how students perceive the experience of on-reserve TYP, this could help to identify problems as well as why certain students drop out prematurely or take more than a year to complete their courses. More than anything else, this study facilitates our hearing of the students' voices. It is my view that what students have to say matters in how learning happens as they have untapped expertise and knowledge that can bring renewed relevance, and authenticity to any reform effort. By exploring the variation in responses, educators can design assessments that identify the variation in conceptions, thereby evaluating the TYP (Rands & Gansemer-Topf, 2016). By asking students to relate their experiences of the TYP in their own words is a very effective way to collect rich and valid data, and mark the start of gathering empirical evidence regarding the characteristics or facets of the college TYP as it appears to some on-reserve FNMI students. By listening to the voices of these FNMI students, the quality of the TYP offered to future high school graduates living on reservations will improve. Furthermore, the study's findings have the potential to impact significantly on the enrolment of FNMI students from this

community on university programmes. The inclusion of the TYP teachers' conceptions of these students' experiences is just as critical as this information can provide significant insights into how to improve instructions, programming, and learning environments, thereby engaging the on-reserve FNMI learner.

### **Thesis Overview**

The following section summarises the structure of the thesis and what readers should expect in the upcoming chapters.

**Chapter 2.** In the next chapter, I critically review literature exploring some of the barriers to the FNMI learner that contribute to the academic challenges in postsecondary education, including related research on the effectiveness of transition programmes. I critically analyse the global parallels in Indigenous representation at universities before I address the literature on students' experiences and conceptions of learning. I also discuss the theoretical and conceptual framework adapted to explore the variation of students' experiences. This includes literature on deep and surface approaches to learning as well as models on Indigenous way of knowing used by Indigenous community to improve engagement.

**Chapter 3.** This chapter provides a detailed description of the methodology, research design, the participants, and the dissertation's data collection and analysis methods, procedures and limitations. It describes the underlying principles behind the use of phenomenography to explore students' experiences. Finally, the chapter explains how the thesis ensures its validity and reliability as well as the limitations and delimitations of using a phenomenographic approach.

**Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.** These chapters present the research findings and analysis of the students' experiences in the on-reserve programme. Chapter 4 discusses the findings from

interviews. It highlights the participants' conceptions of their experiences in the college TYP.

Chapter 5 details the phenomenographic approach used to present and analyse the results from the data collection.

**Chapter 6.** Chapter 6 synthesises and discusses the results in light of the research questions, literature review, and the findings' implications. It also discusses recommendations for improvements based on the findings.

**Chapter 7.** The final chapter presents the conclusion and the main challenges encountered while conducting this study, as well as the implications for practice.

## **CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to the 2016 Canadian census, nearly 1.7 million people identified as FNMI, representing a 42.5 percent since 2006, a growth rate of more than four times that of the non-indigenous population (Kirup, 2017). FNMI students therefore, represent a section of a diverse, young, and rapidly growing population of Canada while a very significant increase in FNMI students in the education system is expected at all levels (Statistics Canada, 2015; Wesley-Esquimaux & Buldoc, n.d.). In this study, it is critical that readers appreciate the challenges Canadian FNMI face in the postsecondary system in relation to their non-indigenous counterparts in Canada.

### **Indigenous Performance in Postsecondary Education**

The issue of the low educational achievement of a rapidly growing Indigenous population has serious implications for Canada, since the more educated the Indigenous population gets, the more likely they will have access to the labour market, which will in turn address any socio-economic gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous (Canete, 2011; Holmes, 2006). In 2011, nearly half (48 percent) of Canadian Indigenous within the 25-64 age group had a postsecondary qualification in comparison to about two thirds (65 percent) of non-Indigenous in the same age group (Statistics Canada, 2015). The type of postsecondary education is differentiated into non-degree trade certification granted by diploma-granting colleges, skill development institutions, or baccalaureate or first professional degree programmes awarded by a university (Canadian Council on Learning, n.d.). Figure 2.1 shows Indigenous are more likely to have non-university postsecondary trades and college certificates than university degrees, almost on par with non-Indigenous students (Fahy, Steel, & Martin, 2009).

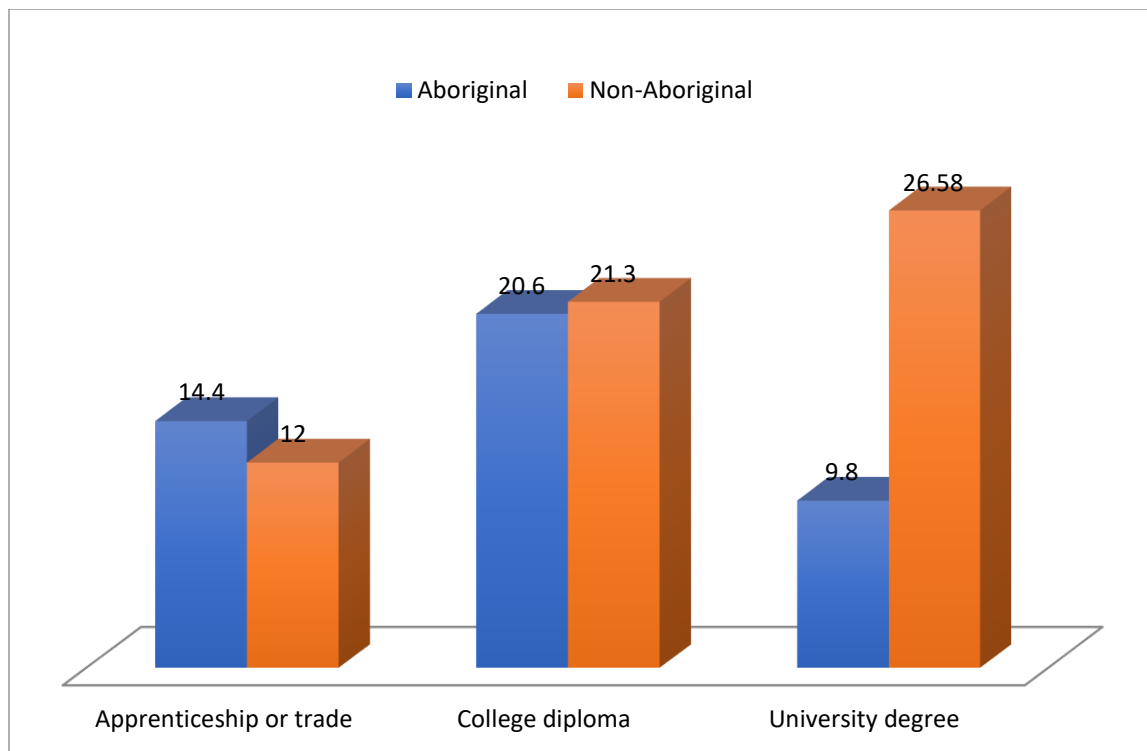


Figure 2.1. Comparison of the percentage of Aboriginals (Indigenous) and non-Aboriginals (non-Indigenous) aged 25-64 in postsecondary programmes (adapted from 2011 Census Statistics Canada, 2015).

While Indigenous learners have been experiencing successes within non-degree postsecondary career/vocational postsecondary education, only 9.8 percent of Indigenous learners have university certificates, diplomas or degrees at the bachelor level or above as compared to 26.5 percent of non-Indigenous students (Statistics Canada, 2015). This gap in academic achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners implies that significant initiatives are needed to reduce the barriers preventing native learners from making a successful transition (Jing, n.d.).

### **Global Parallels in Indigenous Representation at University**

The underrepresentation of the Indigenous learner in postsecondary education is by no means unique to Canada. From an international perspective, Indigenous representation in

universities globally has exhibited similar trends of minor representation at the postsecondary level. In common with researchers who have investigated the reasons for the underrepresentation of Indigenous students in higher education, Cottrell (2010) points out the parallels in the educational experiences of native students in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, which could relate to their European colonial background and experience of similar educational systems. Like the United States, New Zealand and Australia, Canada was once a European colony, and it appears that they have all inherited a modified Eurocentric educational system (Gerber, 2014; Hudson, 2003; Waterman, 2007).

The Eurocentric educational system emerged during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from a European civilization identity during the initial formation of a global structure designed for governing the social world, both within and beyond Europe (Baker, 2012). While some may justify the positive aspect of having a Eurocentric model of education, the primary concern was for the maintenance of a European socioeconomic, political, cultural domination of the world. Although it was a formalised system, many Indigenous people were marginalised as they are introduced into an educational system that rarely includes their histories, heritages and culture. The consequence of colonialism and its Eurocentric educational system help to explain the gap in education between the Canadian Aboriginal population and the non-Indigenous population.

Cotterel (2010), in his research on indigenous peoples worldwide, has suggested that knowledge of countries' historical background could help educators to understand the challenges that native learners face globally. According to Battiste (2002), Waterman (2007), Neeganagwedgin (2010) and Nguyen (2011), colonial education strategies and attempted assimilation into European culture have had devastating impacts on Indigenous peoples. Instead



of respectfully recognising and celebrating their culture in schools, the Eurocentric model of education did little to empower the native learners. Since history shows that the school system has not catered to their needs since colonisation, this could help explain why the Indigenous population is underrepresented in universities as compared to non-indigenous people.

Another parallel is that – except for New Zealand – the population of Indigenous people in these countries is relatively small compared to the non-Indigenous population. In 2013, 14.9 percent of New Zealand's population was native and are known as the Maori people (Census Quick Stats, 2013). The National Household Survey enumerated 4.3 percent of Canada's population as Indigenous in the 2011 Census (Statistics Canada, 2015). In 2011, the Indigenous population of Australia was 3 percent of the country's population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Meanwhile, the United States Census Bureau estimated that about 0.8 percent of the United States' population were of Native Indian descent (American FactFinder, n.d.). Although the indigenous peoples in these four countries represent a small portion compared to the non-indigenous population, nevertheless, the Indigenous population is growing rapidly in these countries and at a rate much higher than the non-Indigenous populace.

The difference in educational attainment between indigenous learners and non-Indigenous students globally (as evidenced in the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Canada) is by no means coincidental. Figure 2.2 illustrates the trend in comparative university representation between the indigenous and non-indigenous populace with at least a first degree in the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada respectively. For the purpose of comparison, the most recent data that compares Indigenous and non-Indigenous with at least a first degree for all four countries was for 2006. The gaps in education attainment between non-Indigenous and Indigenous aged 24-64 with a first degree were all below that of the non-

Indigenous for all four countries (Canadian Conference of Students, 2013). The United States has the smallest gap of the four countries with 8.6, while Australia had a difference of 18 percent, New Zealand 13 percent, and Canada 15.7 percent. On average, the gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous receiving a university degree in these countries is 13.8 percent. This reality means that the Indigenous learner is estimated to be almost 14 percent less likely to obtain a degree than their non-Indigenous counterpart is.

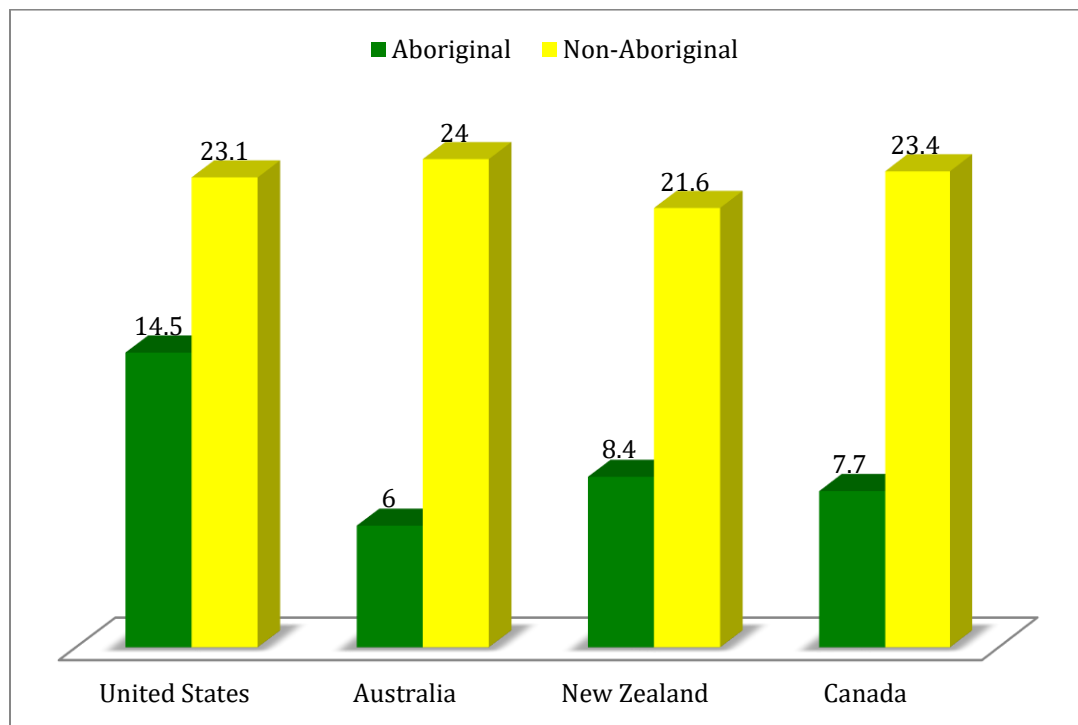


Figure 2.2. Percentages of Aboriginal (Indigenous) and non-Aboriginal (non-Indigenous) in four countries with at least a first degree (adapted from Statistics Canada, 2009).

Globally, statistics show that Indigenous underrepresentation at a university level could a consequence of the legacy of colonialism and the attempt to assimilate them into mainstream society. According to some researchers, this policy has influenced all aspects of Indigenous life including tradition, socio-economic conditions, equity levels, and others (Neeganagwedgin, 2010; Nguyen 2011), thus creating barriers that negatively affect their ability to compete with

non-Indigenous. For the purpose of this study, barriers are considered to be circumstances that deter Indigenous students from achieving the skills and formal education required to succeed in universities. These obstacles present inequality and cause Indigenous students to be less academically prepared than their non-Indigenous peers. Inequality is regarded in terms of its historical, political, economic and social contexts.

### **Barriers to Indigenous Success in Postsecondary Education**

Looking at barriers can help us to understand better the patterns of access and aid policy makers use to improve opportunities for those students currently underrepresented in universities. While each barrier can impact the likelihood of high school graduates succeeding in the transition programme, it is clear that none can fully explain who will not succeed. In addition, the participation of young high school graduates in postsecondary education can be affected by a variety of factors. In exploring the experiences of these students in an on-reserve college TYP, some insights into which barriers are relatively important in preventing them from successfully completing the transition programme can be identified.

### **History and Contemporary Context**

According to the Report of the Royal Commission (Dussalt & Erasmus, 1996), much of the problems encountered today in Indigenous communities can be traced back to colonial history. The literature on the history of the schooling of FNMI people in Canada illustrates that many of the challenges that their students face in accessing university today stem from a history of colonialism that tried to eradicate native culture via the residential school system that lasted from the 1840s down to the 1990s (AFN, 2012; Battiste, 2002; Neeganagwedgin, 2010; Nguyen, 2011; RCAP, 1996). By this I mean that the Canadian mainstream education system for many

years promoted the differential treatment of Indigenous students based on their race and systematically denied them the opportunity to prepare for entry into inclusive workplaces or postsecondary education.

### **A Eurocentric Education Model and Residential School System.**

In the modern world, Europe, the colonizer, was the most advanced civilization that felt obliged to educate, develop and civilize others, even using violence in some of its missions (Dussel, 1993). Based on a political system that assumed that civilisation was linear, a Eurocentric education model emerged that positioned Europeans at the upper end of the spectrum with all others falling below them (Hutching, n.d.). This was the situation with the European colonizer and the indigenous peoples of Canada, who, under the Eurocentric education model, established educational institutions called residential schools to assimilate Indigenous into a supposedly Canadian way of knowing (Battiste, 2002; RCAP, 1996). This educational system was imposed on the FNMI by the government and churches to assimilate them into what was then a European society (Battiste, 2002). The goal of the then Canadian government was to rid indigenous people of their cultural identities which Cottrell (2010) describes as a “modernization and colonisation enterprise, which sought to relegate Indigenous peoples globally to invisibility and backwardness” (p. 224). Indigenous children were uprooted from their families and communities, alienated and sent away to institutions to be schooled in what were known as Indian Residential Schools.

The residential school system negatively affected Indigenous families and their attitudes toward schooling as it continued to neglect indigenous ways of knowing and perpetuated institutional and systemic racism (Gerber, 2014; Hudson, 2013). They did not ask for an educational system to change their cultures, ways of life, values and governing authority,

however, this form of education was to teach their children, families and communities that their ways of life were inferior to those of Europeans (Neeganagwedgin, 2013). The prohibition of their language, corporal punishment, abuse and immersion in a programme that aimed to 'civilize the savage' resulted in long-term negative experiences. Not only was the practice of racial discrimination in the education system perpetuated by government-instituted policies and structures, such practices also proved to be hostile to indigenous modes of learning (Battiste, 2002; Faehlich, 2012; Hudson, 2003; Kirkness, 1999; Neeganagwedgin, 2013).

The hardships of the Indian Residential School era had (and still have) adverse effects on the lives of the FNMI people in Canada. Indian Residential schools were oppressive as many Indigenous children were abused physically and subjected to manual labour and an education designed to prepare them for a domestic life. Many suffered academically, emotionally and socially because of alienation. By taking children away from their families and communities at an early age, most of the customs, languages and traditions were 'lost' during that period (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

FNMIs from the 1920s to the 1940s who desired postsecondary education were forced to give up their status and rights as registered Indians so that they could receive funding to attend postsecondary schools (Canadian Federation of Students, 2013). Eventually, as residential schools began closing down in the 1950s and 1960s, some were transformed into residences for Indigenous students to integrate them into public schools. By 1996, the last residential school was closed (Anishinabek Nation, 2013; Battiste, 2002; BC Teachers' Federation of Aboriginal Education, n.d.; Laing, 2013). Although some students benefitted academically, many did not complete high school or continue their education after leaving residential schools. Because of

such schools, Indigenous presence in university grew from only two students in 1952 to 100 students over the first 17 years (Pin & Rudnicki, 2011).

The closing of residential schools did not necessarily bring about the important changes that were needed to support indigenous students to be successful in higher education. Hatcher and Bartlett (2010) and Hudson (2013) have claimed that any system that attempts to assimilate a Canadian way of learning by disrespecting indigenous experiences and conceptions of learning is very hard to 'fix'. This means that the impact of this system generated so much doubt among the FNMI people that many became unsure of their identity. Being caught between two cultures created identity conflict in the indigenous community, making it difficult for indigenous people to participate in mainstream society, even today.

This is an illustration of how historical educational policies continue to have a lasting impact on FNMI communities and have led to long-term negative experiences derived from the removal of Indigenous children from their parents. This was one of the main factors that helped to create several barriers that contribute to the underrepresentation of FNMI people in postsecondary education (Kirkness, 1999; Learning Branch of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012). According to Neeganagwedgin (2013), the legacy of colonialism and residential schools stripped FNMI of their identity, cultural, and self-identities respectively, developing into distrust and hostility to education and educational institutions. I believe that the outcome of their negative experience in residential schools could be responsible for their loss of confidence in the education system, resulting in many social and economic issues. Ordeals associated with separating young children from their families, neglecting their ways of learning and perpetuating racial discrimination is the foundation on which social barriers such as suicide, alcoholism, high absenteeism from school are built on. The residential school system has had a

long lasting, negative impact on FNMI peoples and their communities, relegating them to an underprivileged and marginalised role in Canadian society. Canada's FNMI students have been hampered by negative stereotypes and prejudices that are linked to low efficacy, and a long history of failure to achieve the academic success. This low academic success results in a limited capacity to provide financial support for their families as well as restricting their access to postsecondary education.

### **General Background of Many FNMI Learners**

Typically, FNMI learners are impacted by other barriers such as financial and resource issues as well as pedagogical and curricular dynamics that negatively influence their educational experience. Among students who are interested in postsecondary education, financial constraints are commonly stated barriers for FNMI learners (Finnie, Mueller, & Wismer, 2015).

#### **Finances**

Historically, FNMI peoples have an unemployment rate higher than that of the non-Indigenous (Dussault & Erasmus, 1996; Statistics Canada, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2016). The latest income data from the 2016 census shows a lower labour force population and employment rates with a higher unemployment rate compared to the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2016). For those Indigenous who are employed, the median annual income of people aged 15 and over was lower than that of the non-Indigenous population. Including those with no certificate, diploma or degree alongside those with a university certificate, diploma or degree above bachelor level, FNMIIs had significantly lower incomes compared to non-Indigenous.

On reserves, there is an even lower median income than those living off-reserve, with four out of five FNMI living on reserves having median incomes that fall below the poverty line (Statistics Canada, 2016). Studies also show that, for most students, the family is the foremost

provider of financial assistance; therefore, they need them to provide the finances for postsecondary education (Malatest & Associates, 2007). Parents with low or no income will be less likely to save enough money for their children's postsecondary education. Although FNMI students can obtain financial assistance for their postsecondary education from student loans and other grants, many students are afraid to incur significant amounts of recurring debt for postsecondary education because they are unsure of the longer-term benefits.

While student loans are supplementary for non-Indigenous families, for FNMI students they represent the entire income for the whole family (Malatest & Associates, 2007). Therefore, access to funding from Indigenous organisations, whose policy of distribution remains a programme of non-repayable grants, is a more viable option. The Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) represents a financial aid programme that is mandatory for the majority of Indigenous students who aspire to a university degree. Those students on the reserve who complete the transition programme can access funds from the PSSSP in the form of a university scholarship offered by the Band (AFN, 2012).

### **Policies and Practices**

The lack of policy support for Indigenous institutions is discriminatory and create barriers that have negative impacts on Indigenous persons and communities (Stonechild, 2006). The PSSSP, which has been in existence since 1970, issues in excess of \$300 million in non-repayable financial aid to eligible Indigenous students entering recognised colleges and universities. Under the administration of the Bands who receive the funds from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, allocations are intended to cover the cost of tuition, books, supplies, travel, living accommodations, tutorials, allowances, and counselling services (AFN, 2012; Usher, 2009). Without a national funding formula for its distribution, however, the current system, by relying



on Band-level administration, is not as efficient and effective as it might be. There are weaknesses in terms of oversight and accountability, causing unauthorised spending, unfairness in funds' rationing, and a failure to prioritise between students. In addition, as costs rise, the amount of money available remains relatively stable, resulting in less people receiving funding each year and, in many cases, these funds are insufficient for FNMI students (AFN, 2012, Usher, 2009). This implies that even if there are more FNMI high school graduates qualifying for postsecondary education, it is possible that many of them will still be unable to access it.

### **Pedagogical and Curricular Practices**

Although inadequate government funding for education leads indirectly to the lower education achievement of Indigenous learners compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts (APN, 2012; Mendelson, 2006; Stonechild, 2006), there are other barriers to postsecondary academic success that have to do with institutional practices that do not meet the needs of Indigenous learners. Readers will see that one of the major factors contributing to indigenous peoples dropping behind their non-Indigenous counterparts is that the practices of the educational institutions do not serve the needs and aspirations of FNMI students (Caito & Luby, 2013; Cottrell, 2010; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Preston, 2008).

In addition, many educational institutions overlook the cognitive learning styles and needs of the FNMI learner. The evaluation of schools on the reserves as well as enrolment studies in some Canadian schools confirm consistently reduced educational levels in comparison to those of non-Indigenous learners due to the education system's weak foundations and lack of academic preparation (Hull, 2000; Hull, Phillips, & Ployzoi, 1995). Some aspects of the inequality of representation could be due to systemic racial discrimination and instructional practices that ignore differences in the culture and cognitive learning styles of the Indigenous as

well as the failure of non-Indigenous teachers to engage these students. These institutional practices have led to high levels of absenteeism and dropout rates, delinquent behaviour, and other socio-economic and socio-cultural barriers that impede FNMI success (Kirkness, 1999).

Research on the Canadian First Nations learners by Preston (2008), Cottrell (2010), Preston and Claypool (2013), Neeganagwedgin, (2013), and Caito and Luby (2013) confirms that one of the major factors contributing to indigenous peoples dropping behind their non-Indigenous counterparts is that the system does not serve the needs and aspiration of these students. In light of this, higher education institutions now acknowledge the culture and identity of Indigenous people and their way of learning, namely a preference for experiential knowledge. The FNMI way of learning was largely a matter of observation and imitation of their elders rather than receiving verbal instructions from them (Hilberg & Tharp, 2002). In other words, indigenous pedagogy values the ability to learn independently by observing, listening and participating, with as little intervention or instruction as possible. This seems compatible with research on the learning styles of Indigenous students.

Furthermore, Hilberg and Tharp's (2002) study on the learning styles of indigenous students stresses the way in which they habitually respond to learning tasks combined with how they organise and represent information, which is different to non-indigenous students. This implies that although there are differences in learning styles between cultural groups, for both indigenous and non-indigenous students, achievement could be improved if instructions are holistic and include observational and collaborative activities with stories and visuals. This has roots in generations of past practices, leaving a legacy of uneven representation of FNMI students in postsecondary education. This insight could account for one of the reasons why more

FNMI students experience success when they transition into vocational, apprentice and trade programmes rather than university degree courses, as was discussed earlier.

Although, past curricular practices demonstrate that the colonial legacy of Canadian's educational system ignores Indigenous styles of learning, educators are accepting that it is likely that FNMI's are capable of equal and probably better performance than their non-indigenous counterparts. Given the motivation and the resources that support indigenous pedagogy, contemporary tertiary educators are embracing learning environments that support cultural inclusivity, perspectives, knowledge and wisdom in higher education.

### **Motivation**

Research shows that a lack of information and motivation influence students' decision whether to continue on to university (HRDS, 2012). Cognitive theorists such as Pintrich and Schunk (2002) have defined motivation as the process by which goal-oriented activity is regained and sustained. It provides the primary impetus to initiate learning and, later on, the driving force behind sustaining learning (Kretchmar, 2016). Parents' education level and the family's financial conditions are some examples of extrinsic factors that motivate students. Approximately 17 percent of children whose parents have high school education or less, compared with about 50 percent for children with university-educated parents, go on to university (Drolet, 2010). These statistics implies that those parents who are university-educated are more likely to encourage their children to access postsecondary education than those who have not gone to university.

Under that Eurocentric education model, many First Nations grandparents and parents were not afforded the educational opportunity to engage in culturally specific Indigenous activities. Such activities could have provided them with a sense of balance, a common autochthonous value where the mental, physical and spiritual domains are acknowledged equally

and incorporated into their lives. Being deprived of their language, culture and tradition, parents were unable to pass on the value of education to their children. Since studies in Canada show that parental education and the motivation they provide appear to be a strong predictor of access to postsecondary education (MacMullen, 2002), thereby improving attainment in each generation should build greater successes in the next. As this was lost during the period of residential schools, FNMI learners are already at a disadvantage. Hence, according to Gordon (2014), creating a generation of mentors and role models is an important step forward for Indigenous learners. The implication is that the probability of each new generation accessing postsecondary education should increase as the role models help bring about social and academic success by restoring their culture and language.

Self-esteem and self-conceptualisation are linked to motivation (Gallop & Bastien, 2016). In a study on FNMI students enrolled in a health programme in a Canadian university, most participants reported feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and a sense of powerlessness, low self-conceptualisation and frustration with their learning due to racism and segregation (Wiebe, Sinclair, Nychuk, & Stephens, 1994). In a competitive postsecondary learning environment such as this, FNMI students are often subjected to high levels of stress and experience feelings of low self-esteem and self-conceptualisation. This is the key reason why institutions that provide programmes such as TYP on the reserves are so important. According to Gallop and Bastien (2016), being around other FNMI students is identified as a key component influencing the individual's motivation to attend a postsecondary institution. Students with positive peer support feel a sense of community, which in turn increases their self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence, all of which are crucial to a commitment to postsecondary education. The implications for locating the TYP in on-reserve communities could be a viable solution to

alleviate the challenges FNMI learners experience in postsecondary institutions. By providing them with a safe environment, we could improve their educational attainment to the extent where they will overcome their personal and educational barriers and gain the confidence they need to succeed at the postsecondary level.

### **Transition Programmes**

Transition programmes were developed as a way to help more FNMI high school graduates develop higher-level skills and professionalism. Studies show that they represent a constructive way for students to access, maintain or recover their identities and strengthen their relationship with postsecondary institutions (Shotton, Lowe, Waterman, & Garland, 2013). Research with autochthonous students in Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii and parts of Canada have proven that transition programmes help to address the problem of lower enrolment and higher dropout rates as compared to non-indigenous students (Wesley-Esquimeux & Bolduc, n.d.). Because of the poor educational achievement of FNMIIs, Indigenous educators in the Canadian government established strategic postsecondary transition programmes to provide reliable support services for FNMIIs who wanted to continue their education. Given the impact of an unfavourable historical past, these programmes provide constructive ways to help eligible pupils, especially those from different geographical areas, to access postsecondary programmes (Battiste, Bell & Findlay, 2002; Dalhousie University, n.d.; Kirkness, 1999; Mendelson, 2006; Wesley-Esquimeux & Bolduc, n.d.).

Transition programmes began in some tertiary institutions as far back as 1970 when the residential schools were in the process of being closed, and a new education system with a mandate to increase access and successful participation of FNMI students in postsecondary education was needed (Dalhousie University, n.d.). These programmes were designed to assist

FNMI students with a smooth transition from high school to postsecondary education by providing a nurturing environment so that they could achieve success at the higher education level (Hill-MacDonald, 2011; Kanu, 2002). Some have been known to assist both off-reserve and on-reserve learners succeed in their educational journey into postsecondary institutions (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2013; Canadian Council on Learning, 2001; Dalhousie, n.d.; Holmes, 2006; Pin & Rudnicki, 2011). Hence, it has already been established that instituting transition programmes represents a positive strategy for Indigenous learners to adjust to enrolling in a given university faculty by including culturally relevant planned activities to foster FNMI academic success.

In 1988, the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), a department of the government, initiated transition programmes in Indigenous Institutions of Higher Learning (IIHL) to offer basic skills training, literacy, upgrading, and financial support to students entering universities. Later on, universities and colleges in partnership with other organisations effectuated the college TYP to provide the services and requisite knowledge and skills needed for university faculty (Assembly of First Nations, 2012, 2011; Partnership for Future Generations, 2012; University of Alberta, 2014).

Even though transition programmes have been part of the education system for approximately forty years, there are still controversies about the relevance of transition programmes (Dalhousie, n.d.). Some educators are still unsure if they are helping in removing barriers or bridging the gap that keeps FNMI students behind other Canadian students since the latter are still under-represented in university faculties and programmes (AFN, 2012). Several Canadian studies explore the challenges experienced by students while transferring into postsecondary education. In addition, Favell (2013), Gokavi (2011), Wesley-Esquimaux (n.d.)

acknowledge that the challenge is to create readily accessible and relevant programmes that would increase access and the successful participation of FNMI students entering the postsecondary education system.

Pidgeon, Archibald, and Hawkey's (2014) research on FNMI students in university has discussed the importance of transition programmes and their relevance to supporting better recruitment and improving access and retention in postsecondary education. From their analyses of surveys and focus group findings of FNMI graduate students, they reported that creating programmes that facilitate a sense of belonging to a learning community improves access and retention. A key component in retention is to provide peer support as mentioned in the previous section in order to help adjust to a new environment socially.

In a doctoral dissertation on the attrition rate of both Canadian Indigenous and non-Indigenous students transitioning into postsecondary institutions, Gokavi (2011) concluded that for both groups to adjust, fit in and persist through postsecondary education, strong support networks throughout their transition are required. Another thesis by Favell (2013) has investigated the effects of transition programmes on Canadian FNMI learners only. The results showed that adding cultural subjects in the curriculum improved the experience of the Indigenous student. In general, research shows that transition programmes seem to be one successful approach FNMI students can use to access postsecondary education. Findings also show the importance of including Indigenous perspectives in postsecondary programming to help students feel comfortable (Council of Ministers of Education, 2010).

Research has provided real life examples of the importance of contextualising or localising the curriculum and pedagogy to respond to the culture of autochthonous youth on reservations in the United States (Castagno & McKinley Jones Brayboy, 2008). Again, this helps

in student school retention because it provides a curriculum that is relevant to their traditions. However, there are still gaps in knowledge about the relative effect TYPs have on the success of enrolment of Canadian on-reserve FNMI high school graduates in university (Council of Ministers of Education, 2010). This is why it is important to document the experiences of those who have gone through a TYP. Up to the time of this study there was no data available on the status of on-reserve FNMI students enrolled in universities. Furthermore, not all policy makers, educators and financial administrators have taken the existing suggestions about appropriate practices for the FNMI learner into account, so there is still a need to collect supporting research to convince them that TYPs require serious and sustained commitment (Council of Ministers of Education, 2010). In this study, students' conceptions and experiences, as well as the teachers' perceptions of students' experiences and approaches to learning, are explored to inform the future development of on-reserve TYPs, policy and practice.

It is critical that readers appreciate the challenges that FNMI learners living in a geographically remote area of Canada face by comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts. Describing the Canadian FNMI students' experiences 'from the inside' could provide qualitatively different factors relevant to an understanding of why there is a disparity between them and non-native learners in postsecondary education. Gathering teachers' perspectives on the issues facing FNMI learners undergoing transition is important in terms of improving the education system such as developing teaching strategies and instructions that can enhance learning.

### **Students' Experiences and Conceptions of Learning**

Harvey, Burrows and Green (1992) were the first to use the term 'student experience' to describe one the most important elements in assessing higher education. Studies of students'



experiences appear to be an important issue globally for higher education researchers since Marton and Saljo (1978). In this research, the term 'students' experiences' is used to refer to aspects of students' development in the environment where they learn, known as the teaching-learning environment.

Students' experiences of the teaching-learning environment are related to the approaches they take to learning (Ramsden, 1997). The ways students approach learning and their conceptions of their learning are significant determinants of the quality of their learning outcomes (Duarte, 2007). Teaching and learning form an interactive process between students and teachers that considers the sociocultural conditioning of groups, group interaction and group elaboration (Kahn, 2017). This means that student learning involves interactions with peers, lecturers and others while teaching and learning should not be seen as separate processes but as relationships. In reality, relationships are not neatly defined; therefore, the complexity of learning requires models that do not focus on one aspect in isolation. Researchers often use models or conceptual frameworks as approaches that help to support the assumptions and theories that corroborate and enlighten their research. A conceptual framework is usually a visual diagram showing the presumed relationships between the key factors, constructs and variables being studied (Gray, 2014). Although it may seem very simplistic to explain a very complex phenomenon, it nevertheless provides a broad understanding of the relationship that exists between a student's experience and variations in conceptions of learning.

Figure 2.3 demonstrates a conceptual framework of the relationships that exist between the student's experience and the learning approach adopted. Viewed from cognitive and affective perspectives, students' experiences represent the social, academic and emotional interactions that they have with a learning institution, and which affect the conceptual approach to learning

(Ramsden, 1997; Temple & Grove, 2014). In this study, the range of ways that people experience phenomena have been described as 'experiences' (Harris, 2008), 'conceptions' (Marton, 1981) or 'understandings' (Sandberg, 2000). In turn, the factors that affect the student's experience and his/her conceptions of their experiences are critical issues in understanding the approach taken to learning in the transition programme. According to McClean (2001), students' conception of learning and changes in the latter are dependent on the factors that affect their teaching-learning experiences.

Students learn for a variety of reasons and the context in which they are placed determines their approach and the quality of the outcome (Biggs, 1991). Students' conception of learning and changes in conceptions of learning are dependent on the factors that affect their experiences, which include external, sectoral, institutional, academic and student factors (McClean, 2001). In general, students show a certain consistency in their approaches to learning, and it is their perceptions of the learning environment that influence how much is learned and how well.

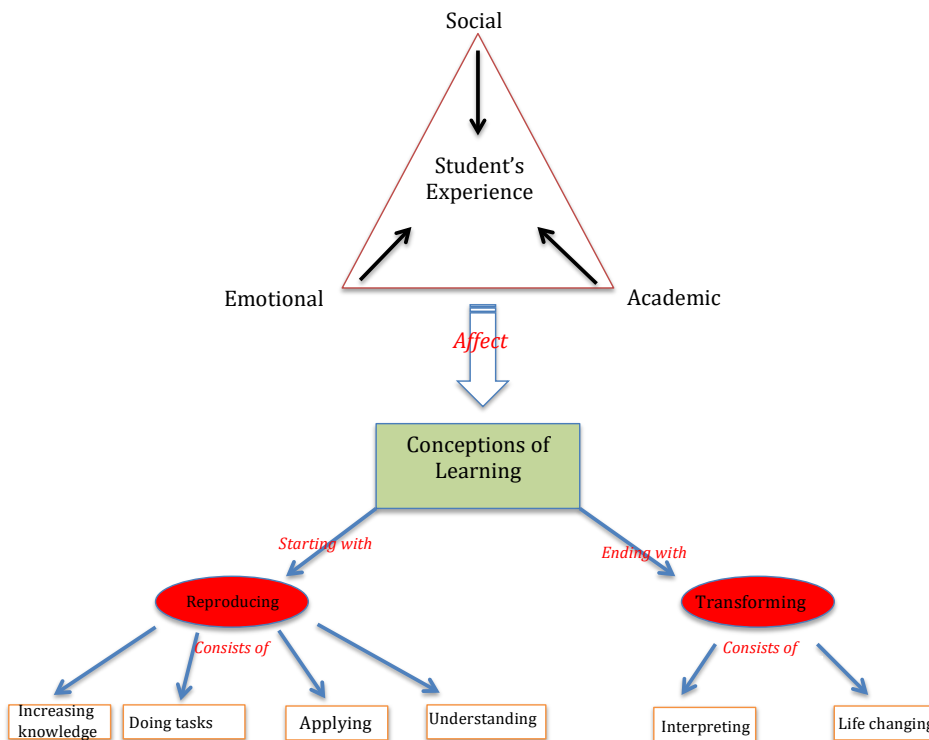


Figure 2.3. A conceptual framework outlining a modification of the ways of experiencing learning (adapted from Marlon & Booth, 1997)

The research of Keating, Davis, and Holden (2006) on the major elements that influence students' experiences and that of Benckendorff, Ruhanen, and Scott (2009) on deconstructing students' experiences, identify important variables that affect students in their teaching-learning environment. In their studies of non-indigenous students, they identified five variables that were common influential factors affecting the quality of learning. There is no reason to suggest that these factors could not also affect FNMI learners.

In addition, Benckendorff et al.'s (2009) conceptual framework includes institutional, student, sectoral, and external factors respectively as issues that affect students' experiences. In addition to these factors, Keating et al. (2006) have acknowledged that academic adjustment is one of the most difficult adjustments in a student's experience. This is very significant when considering the challenges of transitioning from high school to postsecondary education.

Adjusting academically to different styles of teaching, de-socialising and socialising in university can impinge on the academic success of any student but it could be more challenging for the FNMI learner who might be at a disadvantage due to the reasons discussed earlier in this section.

Figure 2.4 schematises students' experiences using five concentric circles, each representing the five factors identified in the literature as influencing the student's experience.

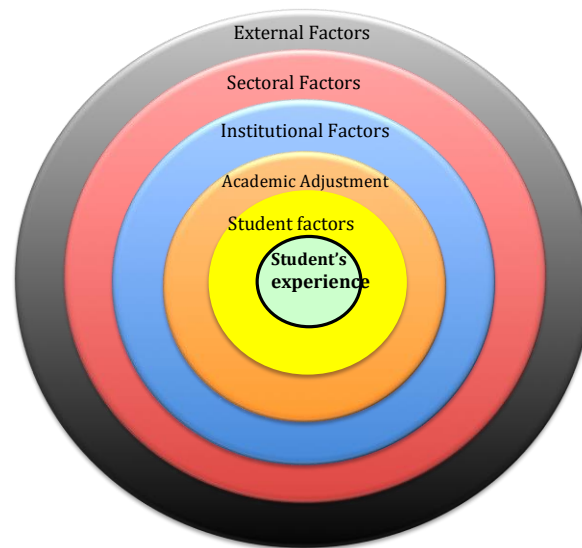


Figure 2.4. Model of the students' experiences that influence learning (adapted from Keating, Davis, & Holden, 2006 and Benkendorff, Ruhanen, & Scott, 2009)

The circles represent the idea that the academic, social and emotional aspects of students' experiences in their learning environment are defined by, student, academic, institutional, sectoral and external factors respectively. The farther away the factor appears from the centre, the less control the student has over how that factor impacts on their teaching-learning. The model also implies students' experiences in the teaching-learning environment vary from student to student as each has different needs and socialises differently (Keating, Davies, & Holden, 2006).

Other studies have helped to fill some gaps regarding what we did not know about what students are experiencing in higher education. For instance, Deters' (2015) research comparing the experiences and needs of international postsecondary students from China and South Korea identified communication as well as socio-cultural, academic, financial and institutional factors as major issues that affect teaching and learning. Four of his five themes resemble those identified in the work of Benckendorff et al. (2009). Each factor that affects students' experiences is elaborated on in the section below.

### **Student factors**

For this study, student factors are observable, 'non-cognitive' variables that impact the learning experiences of the FNMI students' transition programme. While the institution and staff are responsible primarily for creating the conditions that stimulate and encourage learning, students have a responsibility to construct their knowledge (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008). Due to barriers discussed earlier in this chapter, exploring student factors such as motivation, interest, attitude, academic preparedness, perceptions and expectations, sense of purpose, occupational aspirations, and study habits are important if we are exploring the experiences of the FNMI learner.

### **Academic adjustment**

The concept of adjustment is not simple to define but easy to understand. According to Clinciu (2013), adjustment is the psychological process of modifying and managing the problems, challenges, and demands of academic life. For the student, adjustment to postsecondary education is fundamental to their future achievements. In their research on secondary school students entering higher education, Keating, Davis, and Holden (2006) have argued that adjusting to a new teaching and learning approach can be one of the most difficult

adjustments students make in transitioning to higher education. In the new environment, students are expected to take full responsibility for their learning that is entirely different from what they were in their previous learning environment. Their research showed that student motivation and goals, expectations and adjustment to a self-directed student environment respectively were all part of the academic adjustments faced by transitioning students. Hence, academic adjustment is crucial to students' future achievement.

In research on the academic adjustment of FNMI students in postsecondary education at Brock University, Whitley, Rowena and Brownlee (2014) compared Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in terms of the inter-relatedness of self-conceptualisation, strengths and achievement. The results showed that students with positive self-conceptualisation – one measure of psychosocial adjustment – have higher *grades* and lower levels of alcohol and drug use, depression, and anxiety. Indigenous students experience poorer educational and psychosocial outcomes than non-Indigenous Canadians (Whitley, Rowena, & Brownlee, 2014). From another study involving a small, select sample of Canadian FNMI students just entering college, researchers concluded that the key to retaining students included preparing them academically for the challenges of college or university (Alexitch, 2010).

### **Institutional factors**

Institutional factors relate to the policies, standards and procedures that guide behaviour and the practices of the educational institution and impact on student experience. These may include the processes that exist within the institution's structure, such as curricular configurations, courses offered, budget and staffing. On the issue of performance, Saenz, Marcoulides, Jum, and Young (1999) have positively linked student performance to library use, which represents a physical structure in the institution. The students who have trouble with

regards to library facilities found **it** as challenging as those who faced other institutional factors such as social support, course structure and content, and a lack of learning support resources. In a report on improving the indigenous education experience in public schooling, Fisher (2002) recommended that the curricula change to reflect more Indigenous content, implying that the role of the institution is paramount in the student's experience.

### **Sectoral factors**

A sector is a segment of the economy that includes companies providing the same types of products or services (Free Dictionary, n.d.). Global trends caused by sectoral competition and collaboration are influencing the policy and managerial approach of higher education institutions continuously (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). The sectoral factors identified in this study, as well as the changes which Benkendorff, Ruhanen, and Scott (2008) later identified as sectoral factors, are features that have some bearing on students' learning experiences. For example, by adopting a customer focus approach to managing the demands of students (Sirvanci, 1996), some institutions can attract a more diverse student population and improve retention. The situation however, in this research is unique, in that the student population is restricted to high school graduates from the reserve.

### **External factors**

Any variable that is beyond the scope of the institution and affects its ability to achieve its goals and objectives is known as an external factor (Definitions.net, n.d.). The latter might include competition, culture, political environments, technological changes, economic issues, and financial matters. Economic pressures and economic factors influence students' experiences. Studies show that some external factors such as family stress impact negatively on students' performance (Irfan & Shabana, 2012). A case study in Bangladesh, conducted by Raychaudhury,

Debnath, Sen, and Majumde (2010), shows that academic performance depends on socio-economic factors including students' class attendance, family education background, and income. Relating to indigenous education, Fisher (2002) suggests that history, racism, parents' educational attainment, the family context and poverty are some external factors that impact on FNMI students' experiences. Other external factors include budget cuts resulting in curriculum changes (Gregorio, Farrington, & Page, 2000).

### **Students' Conception of Learning**

The researcher's interpretation of the students' voices recounting their experiences during their approach to their learning are key to the findings' discussion and analysis. According to Marton (1981), phenomenon can be experienced in a limited number of ways in a range called 'categories of description'. Students approach their learning using a hierarchy of categories describing learning, starting from 'concrete' up to 'transforming' (Marton, 1981; Marton, Beaty, & Dall'Alba, 1993). These categories form the foundation for the development of a hierarchy of understandings known as the 'outcome space' (Marton, 1994), consisting of combinations of categories of description or ways of experiencing a given phenomenon (Sin, 2010; Stamouli & Huggard, 2007) which will be discussed in more detail in the methodology of Chapter 3.

Conceptions are established as two ends of a situation or phenomenon, namely the phenomenon as it is and the relationship to the phenomenon as it is experienced (Svensson & Theman, 1983). Saljo (1979) in his study on university students' reading experiences, identified five qualitatively distinct conceptions of the learning experience (learning as the increase of knowledge; learning as memorising; learning as the acquisition of meaning; learning as the abstraction of meaning; and learning as an interpretive process aimed at understanding reality). In turn, Giorgi (1986) substantiated those conceptions in his studies in phenomenological



psychology. In a five-year study on the experiences of university students, Marton, Beaty, and Dall'Alba (1993, cited in Marton & Booth, 1997), identified six conceptions of learning. Five of them were isomorphic to the five identified by Saljo (1979; 1982) and Giorgi (1986), who added the sixth conception, changing as a person.

I adapted the conceptual model (Figure 2.5) because it shows the six distinct conceptions of the learning experience identified by Marton et al. (1993) to be applicable to this study. I arranged the conceptions in a nested hierarchical manner, starting with the smallest box in the middle representing the simplest stage of the learning process. The model uses 'nested' boxes to offer an insight into the various ways in which students embark on the learning experience. The boxes are metaphors regarding how students tend to 'box' themselves into different stages of the learning process.

Nested hierarchy of the six conceptions of the learning process

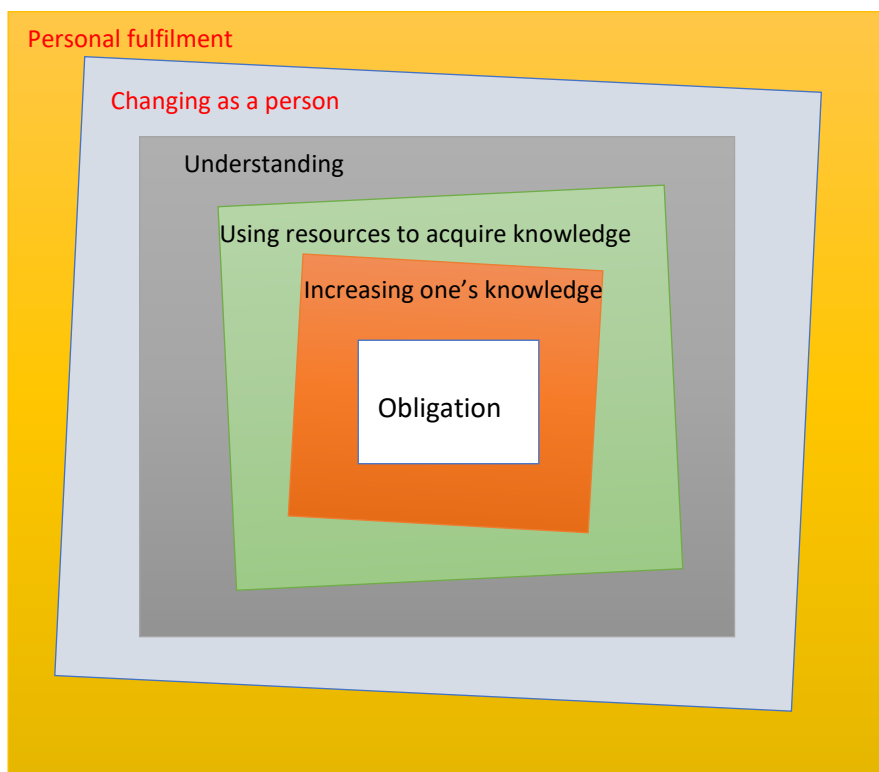


Figure 2.5. Conceptions of Learning Model (adapted from Marton, Beaty, & Dall'Alba, 1993)

Also shown in the model is how the learning process becomes more complicated as we move away from its centre. The further out we go from the middle, the larger the nested boxes become to illustrate that the learning approach also becomes deeper as the learner seeks more meaning. The boxes are not nested snugly into the outer ones, showing that although conceptions are related, they are not just larger reproductions of each other. Each conception has distinct characteristics that make it different from the others. Some conceptualise the learning experience as limited to learning tasks, while others look further beyond that to the world that can open up for them because of how they make use of their knowledge (Marton & Booth, 1997).

The different sizes and shapes of the boxes correlate to the variations in conceptions or approaches to learning. The three inner boxes focus on a surface approach to learning where students see their success as linked to social-oriented achievement motivators for obtaining a qualification and avoidance of failure (Tao & Hong, 2014) or surface conception (Purdie & Hattie, 2002; Ridley, 2007; Tao & Hong, 2014). The latter focus on learning driven by the desire for knowledge and the quest for meaning, linking ideas that lead to understanding or a deep conception (Ridley, 2007; Tao & Hong, 2014; Zhu, Valcke, & Schellens, 2008). The conception of learning framework (Figure 2.5), serves as a representation of the variations in students' experiences identified and they were interpreted in the following ways:

### **Conception 1 – learning as an obligation**

An obligation is a sense of duty, or loyalty, commitment, and personal responsibility to individuals such as parents, teachers and group leaders (Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996; Willems, 1967). Learning can be conceived as derived from a socially oriented achievement perspective where students try to satisfy someone they respect highly (Ross, 1992; Tao & Hong, 2014). In addition, learning seen as an emphasis on duty and obligation (Purdie, Hattie, &

Douglas, 1996) is sparked by extrinsic motivation, which is an activity or behaviour undertaken for some external reason (Pintrich, 2003). The dilemma with conceiving learning from a sense of obligation or from a socially oriented perspective is that eventually learning will slow down when there is fear of letting down the individual.

In light of a cultural emphasis on duty and responsibility, particularly to one's parents, teachers and elders (Purdie, Hattie & Douglas, 1996), it is a learning experience that focuses on an accumulation of new information. Little attention is paid to the components of the learning experience. In this conception, the task of learning new or higher skill levels or increasing the quantity of information might result in some students becoming anxious and losing interest in what they are doing.

### **Conception 2 – Learning as increasing one's knowledge**

Learning is seen as completing tasks (courses) that seem unrelated to each other. In this conception, learning is a means to an end as the knowledge or skill gained is for a specific identifiable future purpose (Purdie et al., 1996). The learning experience becomes something internal as the student prepares to consider new acquisitions in general contexts. The emphasis on learning is on future aspirations such as further study or career development.

### **Conception 3 – learning as using resources to acquire knowledge**

In this conception, learning is referred to as a dependence on other resources (Purdie, et al., 1996). In a study that explores school resources and outcomes, Grubb (2008) defined resources as practices and programmes – including human resources – that make the institution a supportive place, thereby improving output. Grubb also developed a taxonomy of resources: simple, compound, complex and abstract. Simple resources range from textbook materials and teacher expertise and training, to more complex resources such as the teacher's perception of

their institution's ability to support them. Another external factor that influences learning behaviour is advances in technology that not only deliver but also actively engage students (Benckendorff et al., 2009). In this study, resources refer to the simplest classification such as physical objects and classroom factors, to complex resources such as instructional approaches. Resources themselves do not bring about change (Kurdziolek, 2011), but educators and policy makers believe that by providing more resources they can improve student-learning outcomes. The students and teachers who perceived that the unavailability of resources is the main deterrent to the success they hoped for, infer that knowledge is something fixed and seem to justify the view that it can only be passed on from instructor to student (Kurdziolek, 2011) or accessed from textbooks (Grubb, 2008).

#### **Conception 4 – learning as understanding**

In accordance with the findings by Marton et al. (1993), students who were classified as holding this conception of learning, typically spoke of finding meanings related to classroom learning. In this study, learning as understanding involves contextualising newly gained knowledge as well as integrating it into their life. The learner adopts a perspective allowing them to look in a particular way at the things they are learning. It is also a personal process in which they come to see things in their own way through the development of their meaning. In other words, the learning experience becomes a process of developing meaning and their particular worldview.

#### **Conception 5 – learning as changing and seeing something in a different way**

In this conception, learning as changing and seeing something in a different way is aimed at understanding reality. This implies that s/he examines things critically and from different angles. Although the focus is on changed ways of seeing things, there is almost a sense of moral

improvement or social responsibility that comes along with this way of thinking (Purdie et al., 1996). Here the student is not just taking a different view of things, but also a wider perspective or multifaceted interpretation. In this conception, the learning experience becomes more dynamic and fluid as the learner experiences a new paradigm shift in their view of the world and its phenomena.

### **Conception 6 – learning as personal fulfilment**

In the sixth conception, learning results in personal fulfilment as the person works towards fulfilling their highest need. Many educators regard this as the ultimate stage of learning. It leads to greater maturity, personal growth, while this change or improvement sometimes leads to a sense of empowerment (Purdie et al., 1996). As posited by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Schunk, 2012), at this level the physical needs, the need for security, love and self-esteem are already satisfied. The learner is therefore problem-focused, have an increased perception of reality and an ongoing freshness of appreciation of life. Similar to Maslow's self-actualization need, this conception represents the greatest extent of the learning experience, as the learner is no longer just an agent of knowledge acquisition, retention and application. Neither is the learner simply the beneficiary of learning but also the recipient of the effects of learning through experiential learning.

Some students have a surface understanding of learning that involves the first three conceptions while other students have a deep understanding of learning that involves the next three conceptions. From these six conceptions of learning come two overriding categories encompassing students' approaches to learning known as 'deep' and 'surface' respectively. The concepts of deep and surface approaches to learning was conceptualised originally in a phenomenographic case study by Marton and Saljo (1976). They found similar differences in the

levels of study processes of students in higher education where it was evident that how students perceive their teaching-learning environment has an effect on the ways they approach their learning. The approaches used by students in this study were found to relate strongly to their success in the TYP as different students were found to make predominant use of one of these approaches. While the approach to learning suggests how students learn, conceptions of learning refer to how students represent learning (Duarte, 2007). In other words, a conception is the qualitatively distinct manner in which persons voice the way they think about the learning experience. According to Duarte, conceptions of learning imply students' natural understanding or interpretation of the learning phenomena. The ways students conceive of their learning experience relate to the way they approach their studies and consequently impacts on the quality of their learning outcomes (Duarte, 2007; Posser, Trigwell & Taylor, 1994).

### **Approaches to Learning**

The defining features of approaches to learning that have emerged from researchers is whether a student's approach to learning is inherent (fixed) or a response to a situation (variable) (Beattie, Collins, & McInnis, 1997). The term 'deep and surface approaches' as used by Marton and Saljo (1976) in their phenomenographic research, led to a more socially constructivist view of student learning. In other words, learning is an active process. What a student intends to get out of learning determines whether a deep or surface approach will be used, and the approach used in turn determines the level of performance (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). In addition, Boulton-Lewis, Marton, and Lewis (1997) (who also studied university students' approaches and conceptions of learning), claimed that learners adopt approaches that focuses on either understanding or reproducing. In both cases, the students who are active learning participants are

generally thought of as taking a deep approach to learning while students described as surface approach learners are merely responding to a system of learning.

Educational psychologist Biggs (1987) shows that approaches to learning can vary according to students' metacognition, meta-learning capabilities and locus of control, while their perceptions of their environment, including the curriculum, instruction strategies and the assessment system inform the approach to learning which they would adopt (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Webb, 1997). These perspectives can substantiate the inferences made in this study, namely that on-reserve FNMI students adopt approaches to learning in response to what they experience in their learning environment.

Although the study focuses on the deep and surface approaches to learning, I am aware that there are other approaches to learning. One such approach is identified by Entwistle and Biggs as the 'strategic' or 'achieving' approach (Haggis, 2003) where some students also use both deep and surface approaches to achieve their goals, depending on what is required and the conditions under which they are learning, such as how much time they have to prepare for an assessment (Biggs, 2007). There are still differences in opinions about what embodies the strategic approach as some critiques say that it is the ability to switch between deep and surface approaches while other argue that it is the way students organise their time and working environment, rather than an approach (Beattie, Collins, & McInnes, 1997; Volet & Chalmers, 1992).

### **Surface Learning Approach**

According to Beattie, Collins, and McInnes (1997), surface approach to learning results in a low or surface level of understanding. Surface approaches are characteristically reproducing in nature as learning is conceived to be restricted to the tasks involved in acquiring the

knowledge and skills necessary to achieve the outcomes of the course. Researchers suggest that surface learners conceive of the learning experience as merely focusing on the tasks or unrelated parts of a task (Biggs, 1991; Trigwell & Posser, 2001), without actually understanding the deeper aspect of seeking meaning from their experience. These learners are described as having a surface conception of their learning (Marton & Booth, 1997; Ridley, 2007; Webb, 1997) or exhibit an unreflective conception characterised by 'cutting corners' and 'taking short cuts' (Howle & Bagnall, 2013). They also reflect a means-to-an end attitude, such as going to university to obtain a suitable job or satisfying some external requirements (Biggs, 1991; Platov, Mavor, & Grace, 2013). It is this negative perception and the decision to satisfy the learning task that often fosters a surface approach to learning. Research findings by Fransson (1977) later confirmed by Saljo (1979), reveal that students also adopt a surface approach to learning due to anxiety or a lack of interest or perceived relevance. The implication is that students who feel assured in their environment, perceive their learning as relevant and interesting and are receptive to acquiring more knowledge.

Biggs (1991, as cited in Howle & Bagnall, 2013), Ross (1992), Tao and Hong (2014), suggest that some students who adopt a surface approach to learning conceive learning from a socially oriented achievement perspective where they satisfy someone whom they hold in high esteem. They also see learning as a case of applying resources to acquire the necessary knowledge, achieve the minimum course standards and score the minimal pass marks to achieve the programme outcomes. A number of students adopt a surface approach because of factors such as misunderstanding the requirements of a course, genuine inability, lack of time, and to make sense of the given method the teachers use to impart the content (Howle & Bagnall, 2013). I believe that a surface approach to learning is more oriented toward performance, and is subject



to environmental influences such as grades or approval. Subsequently, surface approach learners usually lack self-involvement and self-motivation, which often results in relatively poor outcomes (Ramsden, 2003; Ridley, 2007). Also associated with the surface learning approach is negative perceptions of the teaching-learning environment (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). If students perceive their learning environment as unsupportive, they are likely to exhibit negative emotions that hinder learning and are more likely to adopt a surface approach (Kiminiski, 2012; Pidgeon, 2008).

### **Deep Approach**

Deep learning approaches occur when students are engaged in the learning process and the perceived value of the course content is high. There are several factors that cause students to be engaged. In addition, deep learners are capable of transferring the learned concepts to a variety of situations, thereby creating a denser pattern of connections within their knowledge and understanding (Floyd, Harrington, & Santiago, 2009). The literature elucidates that students whose conception of learning is high in the hierarchy adopt the deep approach to learning (Marton, Beaty, & Dall'Alba, 1993). This suggests that a characteristic of deep approach learners is their ability to self-regulate. By implication, students using the deep approach possess the ability and skills to observe and review their own progress and assess the effectiveness of their study. This requires more effort so they are unlikely to engage in the learning unless they are intrinsically motivated.

Engagement is students' psychological investment in any effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering knowledge, skills or crafts that academic work is intended to provide (Newman, 1992). Richardson and Newby (2006) describe cognitive engagement as the integration of students' motivations and strategies while learning. An engaged student is a

motivated student and research shows that institutions are moving away from the traditional lecture-based pedagogy in favour of more active learner-centred activities, and collaborative activities to enhance student's learning experience.

Students learn more whenever instructors employ learning strategies that keep them engaged. Learning strategies are affected by pedagogical approaches which research has shown are now shifting from a traditional teacher-centred to a more learner-centred approach that leads to deeper level of understanding and meaning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tagg, 2003). This suggests that the more active learners become in teaching-learning experiences, the more likely that they adopt a deep approach to learning.

Although there is no universally-accepted definition of active learning, it can be explained as any instructional method that engages students in the learning process by requiring them to perform meaningful activities and think about what they are doing (Boswell & Eison, 1991). Successful students – defined in this study as students who completed the academic outcomes in the TYP – displayed high levels of cognitive engagement and deep learning. Indeed, the role that a factor such as culture plays in students' approaches is very relevant in active learning since it provides the tools, habits, and assumptions that influence thoughts, behaviour, and the learning task (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Although this study does not attempt to evaluate culture, the issue of cultural values in relation to approach to learning is significant as it presents how tradition and history impact on how indigenous students exhibit surface and deep approaches to learning.

In the theoretical framework of phenomenography, deep and surface learning approach is used to describe the ways in which students engage in the context of the specific task to be accomplished (Beattie, Collins, & McInnes, 1997). It represents the variations in students'

conceptions of their learning experiences but there could be limitations in its scope in explaining what is truly important to the indigenous learner. Although the deep-surface distinction shown in Figure 2.5 is used in this study to analyse the students' approaches to learning, it is critical to note that there may be other learning frameworks that recognize the role that history, culture and traditions plays in FNMI learning. A learning framework that supports cultural identity and ways of teaching using indigenous pedagogy could lead to a deeper approach to learning (CCL, 2009; Pidgeon, 2008). Hence, to explore fully the learning experiences of these students in the TYP, it is imperative to examine teaching/learning perspectives that are aligned to the FNMI learners.

### **Indigenous Perspectives on Learning**

To the autochthonous, learning is regarded as a social activity (Marshall, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978) which includes the learner, teachers, mentors, peers and the community. Students' experiences can be viewed from the indigenous perspective as experiential learning, which is in contrast to the students' experiences identified by Keating, Davis and Holden (2006) and Benkendorff, Ruhanen and Scott (2009). Indigenous ways of knowing are influenced by a holistic perspective where relationships and experiences are based on practices guided by a cultural framework that resonates with indigenous people.

Through the Indigenous way of teaching, children learn how stories of Elders are embedded in their relationship to place and identity (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011). In my experience as a teacher of high school FNMI students, Indigenous perspectives means more than just including a story in the curriculum of how First Nations live in harmony with the environment. For me, it is about developing a relationship with parents and Elders within the community. This involves gathering weekly for family-fun nights where the community and the teachers make crafts and play games, and sometimes sharing in ceremonies and other social

activities in the community. These are some of the ways the medicine wheel is used to symbolize the experience and holistic nature of the Indigenous perspective of experiential learning.

### **The Circle of Life (Medicine Wheel)**

The circle of life is the symbol often used to represent the four most basic elements common to their ways of knowing or experiences – mental, spiritual, physical and emotional (Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Federation, 2012). Although the diversity among First Nations means that some symbols are not universally accepted, the medicine wheel is understood by their culture to denote wholeness and inclusion (OSSTF, 2012). Figure 2.5 is a kinaesthetic and visual representation of the Indigenous' ways of knowing or experiences. The symbol represents the quality teaching practices that a strong culture of collaboration among the school and community can achieve in the development of the whole student.



Figure 2.5. Model of the Ways of Knowing of the Medicine Wheel (Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Federation, 2012).

In Canadian First Nations culture, the circle influences how they view the world and how life evolves, how they grow and work together (Turner, 1996). It is recognised as an organisational tool, provides a holistic and balanced approach to students' experiences, and represents the interconnectivity of all aspects of one's experiences. While the black, white, red,

and yellow colours are somewhat different in different autochthonous cultures, and the order of the colours is not the same in each culture, the circle of life (Medicine Wheel) represents the alignment and continuous interaction of the encompassing intellectual and embodied emotional and spiritual ways of knowing and being (Kind, Irwin, Grauer, & De Cosser, 2005).

The Medicine Wheel conceives the world to be a circle that is divided into mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Each section offers a view of students' ways of knowing and experiencing, and together make up the circle – a holistic view. Holism in Indigenous culture is reflected in oral stories, art, dancing and languages of most Indigenous people (Parent, 2009).

**Mental (Intellectual):** In keeping with the Indigenous tradition, students' minds are engaged through traditional dances, stories, legends, signs and symbols, ways of living and history. The teachers help to situate knowledge within familiar contexts, providing a human sense to students' learning (Walsh, 1999), such as a cabin by the lake.

**Physical:** Students' experiences and learning are embodied in physical activities such as dancing. Dancing to the rhythm of the eagle dance or the wolf dance's drums, for example, are ways in which students use their bodies and senses as a way of knowing (Kind et al., 2005).

**Emotional:** Dancing elicits a sense of joy and freedom. The rhythms, stories, and legends connect students to emotions and experiences. As they hear stories of Elders, they respond with personal stories about their disappointments, fears, and anxieties. Connections such as happiness, joy, pleasure, fear, grief and sadness are made in meaningful ways (Kind et al., 2005).

**Spirituality:** Spirit refers to a vital force that breathes through all things, imbuing one with an animating force of life (Riley-Taylor, 2002). Spirituality focuses on spiritual beliefs,

family customs and celebrations. Spirit references something beyond the material and sensory aspect of life. It is what makes us human and connects us to each other (Kind et al., 2005).

The circle of life has implications for how FNMI students learn as it suggests that the ideal way of learning offers them the opportunity to engage in activities specific to their tradition and their culture. Research indicates that learning experiences should include social engagement and formal community-building efforts where Indigenous values – mental, emotional, physical and spiritual domains – are acknowledged as equal and incorporated (Bastien, 2004; Harrington & Pavel, 2013; Ireland, 2009; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001; Kuokkanen, 2007; Timmons, 2009; Waller et al., 2002). It is this sense of balance that the circle of life depicts as quality teaching practices in Indigenous education. While the circle of life represents the alignment and continuous interactions of ways of knowing, experiential learning entails making meaning from direct experience in respect to location, and collaboration among the school and the community.

Researchers are already integrating indigenous ways of knowing in their teaching using the Medicine Wheel to undermine the hierarchical structure of Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" (Parent, 2009). By destabilising the structure and employing Indigenous words the model is reframed to create a First Nations model to bridge connections with the Eurocentric system. In advocating for change in postsecondary education to meet the needs of students better, some scholars have been studying switching from the three-dimension framework of Bloom's Taxonomy to the four-domain framework of the Medicine Wheel (LaFever, 2016). For teaching practices and curriculum there is already evidence that the model supports student-centred learning with its holistic teachings on spirituality, honouring, relationships, sense of belonging, empowerment and self-knowledge of purpose.

### **Experiential Learning in an Indigenous Context**

The first principle of Aboriginal learning is a preference for experiential knowledge. Indigenous pedagogy values a person's ability to learn independently by observing, listening, and participating with a minimum of intervention or instruction.

Marie Battiste

The learning by experience approach has been well researched and developed by 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars such as John Dewey, David Kolb and Carl Rogers (Kolb, 1994; Kolb & Fry, 1975), but it was a form of Indigenous pedagogy long before experience was given a central role in theories of human behaviours. According to the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) (2009), experiential learning in First Nations traditional teaching and learning entails making meaning from direct experiences, namely through reflection on doing or action. The essence of experiential learning is that what is learned has meaning in terms of the learner's needs, goals and community (Kaminiski, 2012). This includes learning from the land, Elders, traditions and ceremonies while relying on community, parental and family support and the workplace. In this study it is believed that experiential learning fosters interest and engagement in the learning process and, as the findings will show, negative emotions such as fear and anxiety impede learning and encourage surface approaches.

**Experiential learning cycle:** The process of learning depicted in the experiential learning cycle encourages deep learning through action and reflection. The experiential learning cycle consists of four elements – experiencing, reflecting, meaning making and acting. In her research on developing experiential knowledge in nursing through an Elder residence programme, Kamanski (2012) describes experiential learning for the Indigenous as a community-based way to teaching skills, attitudes, language literacy and knowledge. It involves

learning by doing and is connected to life's experiences with the community and natural environment acting as the classroom, revealing an engaged, deliberate, open and aware process as reflected in the traditional knowledge and learning processes. Figure 2.6 shows a representation the Indigenous interpretation of the experiential learning cycle.



Figure 2.6. A model of the experiential learning cycle as interpreted by the Indigenous People (Kaminiski, 2012)

The experiential model is organised as a cycle, with the elements organised in the experiential learn circle involves (1) experiencing, followed by (2) reflecting, then (3) making meaning, and finally by (4) acting. Similar to Kolb and Fry's model, the learning cycle can begin at any one of the four points and learners do not always process the steps in a logical step-by-step fashion. Depending on the learner, the elements can occur all at once or out of sequence.

According to Kaminiski (2012), each element is defined as follows:

- Experiencing – engagement in 'real life' learning experience
- Reflecting – internalization of the experience
- Meaning making – analysis of the experience
- Acting – application of experience to other real-life situations



In keeping with their culture, learning through reflection and doing has always been the Indigenous way of learning. Unfortunately, most instructional models used globally by universities are oriented toward a basic process-product model (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974) that differentiates between instructional processes, learning products, context and prerequisites. According to Seidel (2014), the concept behind this model is that good quality instructional processes will lead to positive learning outcomes on the part of students. The effect of individual processes is mediated by student characteristics such as pre-knowledge, interest, self-conceived ability, socio-economic status or the influence of peers. The quality of instructional processes depends on the quality of the instructions' prerequisites. This implies that the more qualified instructors are, the better the quality of the instruction provided by them. Practising the process-product model does not put the on-reserve FNMI students at an advantage because of the existing barriers mentioned earlier (a Eurocentric education system, policies and practices), which are not conducive to a supportive learning environment. If students perceive that their learning environment is supportive, they are more likely to actively process the learning content and will be intrinsically motivated to learn.

Such a learning environment encourages deep learning processing and, connected to intrinsic motivation, results in positive learning outcomes. Pidgeon (2008) suggests that having learning environments that support strong cultural identities can lead to the formation of cultural capital. Programmes with strong cultural identities can help students develop useable resources and the skills required to access postsecondary education. By connecting students to social networks such as peer groups, FNMI staff and faculty, they are more equipped to face the educational challenges of postsecondary education. In turn, mainstream institutions have been criticised for a lack of emotional and psychological support (Wildcat, 2001) while lacking

cultural capital programmes to help students to build strong self-esteem and capital. Hence, for the on-reserve college transition programme to meet the needs of FNMI students, their focus should be to promote cultural-specific activities and resources that produce outcomes that can lead to higher levels of academic and social engagement.

### **Culture of Respect for Family Values**

In Canadian Indigenous settings, respect for cultural values and family values are very significant. Children are gifts from the Creator and the family, community, and schools are there to nurture, support and encourage. The children are taught to respect everything – the animals, the plants, their Elders, everybody and everything that will affect their future development (MFNERC, 2008). Especially in remote northern bands and their individual members, every decision made is influenced by the question: How will this affect the survival of my community and my family's future? (Ross, 1992). Indigenous parents acknowledge that dropping out of school impoverishes both the child and the community. Therefore, an increasing number of parents are beginning to 'interfere' in the lives of their children (Ross, 1992, p. 120) by demanding that they continue their education so that they can access university and the scholarships offered by the Band. Usually after students graduate from high school on the reserve, the family and community expect them to continue to college. Out of respect and not wanting anyone to feel let down, Indigenous students often tell their parents and adults what they believe they want to hear rather than disagreeing with them (Ross, 1992). Fulfilling the obligations and expectations of parents, elders, and teachers is of utmost importance to FNMI students.

The sense of family obligation more than any other factor makes Indigenous people unique (Ross, 1992) in comparison to their non-Indigenous Canadian counterparts. Studies on

Indigenous students' retention in college and university show that when there is a disconnect between institutional and student/family values respectively, there is a high attrition rate for FNMI students (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). It is for this reason that I will concur with Meyer (2000) and Entwistle and McCune (2004) that the necessity for another conception, namely 'learning as a duty,' is needed to fill the gap in cultural variations (Duarte, 2007) that the deep and surface approach to learning model does not address. Duty to family, Elder or teacher is considered a surface approach to learning in the western culture because of where the motivation originates. In the Indigenous traditions, duty and obligation take on a deeper meaning of transformation when students are engaged and capable.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the FNMI learners in the Canadian education system, describing the challenges they encounter in their learning environment as they transition from secondary to postsecondary education. It reviews critically the relevant literature and assertions made by researchers as to why they are under-represented in universities. Some of the reasons highlighted include socio-economic, historical and political barriers.

The chapter identifies the pertinent literature about students' experiences, conceptions of learning and learning outcomes, and the Indigenous ways of learning. Although displayed in separate diagrams, the complexity of learning does not focus on one aspect in isolation. For example, the approach to learning signals that conceptions of learning and the learning outcome are united in the total experience of learning.

Central to this chapter is that research on non-Indigenous learners and their learning experiences and approach to learning is salient to this study of on-reserve FNMI students' experiences in a transition programme. It shows how a combination of relevant philosophies and

contributions from other researchers in postsecondary education can help to develop a conceptual framework for the analysis and synthesis of this study's findings. This study is important to the educational community given the context of the widening participation and growing number of FNMI students from the reserves who are aspiring to university. Needless to say, the significance of Indigenous' traditional values in relation to their approach to learning is raised in this study. There is also a need to incorporate new key variables in any description of students' learning that considers Indigenous culture.

The next chapter provides a more detailed description of all aspects of the design and procedure used in this study. It will explain how phenomenography is employed as a method to explore the conceptions and experiences of on-reserve FNMI students and their teachers while the former transition to university. Readers will be provided with a rationale for using a phenomenographic approach as well as its epistemology and theoretical standpoint. Studies of students' conception of learning have commonly used phenomenography, a methodological approach that tried to understand how people view the world around them. Exploring FNMI students' experiences and conceptions of learning through a phenomenographic lens could illuminate why some students' approach to learning acts as a barrier to their success while others have a positive approach.

## **CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, the ontological and epistemological perspectives that informed this study are defined and discussed in detail. Having an ontological and epistemological perspective is important because it shapes the approach to theory and the research design while providing the criteria for determining what does and does not constitute valid knowledge. The ontology rectifies the 'what is' or the nature of reality, while epistemology investigates the 'what is meant to know' or the way we are aware of things (Gray, 2014). Ontology and epistemology are based on the beliefs and philosophy of the researcher regarding the conception of the world. This knowledge should give readers an appreciation of the methodological approach taken for this study.

This chapter further discusses the theory and knowledge of phenomenography as the chosen methodology and outlines the reasons for using the proposed methodology to examine and answer the questions associated with this study. It also provides readers with an explanation of the development of phenomenography and why other researchers use it in higher education settings. The theoretical underpinning of the phenomenographic methodology, its validity and reliability – as well as limitations and delimitations – all constitute valid knowledge.

To offer readers a vivid understanding of the FNMI learners, this chapter also provides a detailed description of the background and the participants in the study, the methods used and how the data was collected. I represent the voice of the students in a thematic way and a thematic analysis of their transcribed experiences was undertaken where I explored the participants' varied experiences. Thematic analysis is independent of theory and epistemology as it spans theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Figure 7 shows the ontological, epistemological, and methodological path taken in this research process.

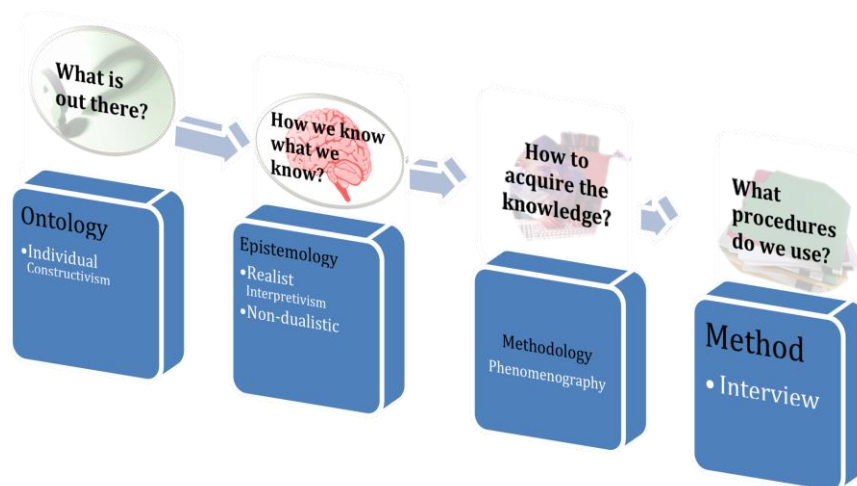


Figure 7. Illustration of the Research Process

### Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives

My position as a teacher and researcher is significant in determining the theoretical perspectives and the philosophical assumptions adopted in this qualitative research. The theoretical perspectives determine the purpose of the enquiry's questions, the methodological strategies, the interpretations and analysis of the findings, and the quality of the research. While ontology answers the question 'What is out there?' epistemology helps us to answer the question 'How do we know what we know?' As different disciplines have different ways of knowing, the roles I play as teacher and researcher determines the philosophical assumptions that I make, thereby determining the ontological and epistemological approach that is best suited for the research.

### Ontological Approach

The ontological assumptions I make as a researcher concerning what constitutes reality and how things really work (Crotty, 1998) conflicts with the ones I make as a high school teacher. As a natural science teacher, I encourage students to explain and predict natural phenomena based on empirical evidence where hypotheses are verified using scientific laws and

theories. Predictions and generalisations are made objectively using a deductive approach. Such an understanding of the natural world is known as positivism, where the ontological position is that objects have an existence independent of the knower (realism) (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2009). In contrast to the role of a physical science teacher, my ontological position as a researcher is not of a positivist but rather relativist (Guba & Lincoln, 2009). This was an opportunity for me to learn how to readjust my perspective as a science teacher to that of a researcher – a relativist. As a relativist, knowledge and meaning can only be understood based on the people who are participating and meaningful reality is constructed from observing the interaction between humans and their social world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

While the ontology associated with positivism takes the position that social phenomena and their meanings or reality exist independent of social actors that are investigated through scientific inquiry, this research is also devoted to the interpretation of the meanings of the experiences of the TYP students. How on-reserve FNMI students conceived of their learning experiences and their teachers' perspectives concerning their experiences are too complex to be understood through observation alone, hence exploring such a phenomenon involves exploring interactions among individuals, in their historical and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2009),

Understanding why the student participants act in such a way calls for an approach that puts forward the ideology of meaning being constructed and not discovered - known as constructivism (Gray, 2014; Richardson, 1999). Gergen (1999, cited in Sanna, Kimmo, & Reijo, 2005), defines constructivism as the systematic way in which an individual constructs reality in relation to the external world. This requires an interpretive approach to reveal the meaning of the matter under research. Regarding epistemology, interpretivism is linked to constructivism (Gray, 2014) and the ontological assertion of interpretivism is that people are continually constructing

meanings concerning a given phenomenon in different ways, focusing on whether social worlds exist in similar or different ways according to subjective interpretations (Richie & Lewis, 2003). With the assumptions mentioned above, I approached this study as a researcher rather than a science teacher.

### **Epistemological Approach**

The value of having clarified the ontological and epistemological approach becomes evident when designing the research. Epistemology is concerned with the nature and forms of knowledge, namely how knowledge can be created, acquired and communicated (Cohen et al., 2007). An epistemological perspective contributes to clarifying the tools used, how and where the data will come from, and how it is going to be interpreted. Since social phenomena are created from perceptions, each student constructs meaning regarding the same phenomenon in different ways. All knowledge is constructed through the individual learner's interaction with the physical environment, known as 'individual constructivism' (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 6). The theoretical perspective of constructivism is that truth and meaning do not exist in the world outside of the individual but by the individual's interactions with the world. Constructivism rejects the idea that the researcher, through some rigorous scientific processes, discovers knowledge, but instead meaning is constructed, not discovered. In this research, students' conceptions are created by their interactions with the world, as they know it on the reservation. All meanings are considered to be equally valid concerning the same phenomenon. Therefore, it can be argued that the theory of knowledge of this research is based on a research philosophy that presumes that a knowable, objective exists in reality (Grey, 2014). The validity relies on the veracious, oral accounts of the experiences of the FNMI learners in the TYP. All accounts are real to the individuals, but in trying to explain differences in student behaviour and conceptions



of learning, they are also open to interpretations, a concept Richardson (1999) refers to as a 'realist' interpretation (p. 65). The interpretive epistemology is one of subjectivism and my aim is to bring in consciousness of hidden social forces and structures to help discover the particular ways people understand the phenomenon.

Since the research aims to describe, analyse and understand experiences, phenomenography was the methodology chosen since it seeks to validate the argument that one can understand any phenomenon in any limited number of qualitatively different ways (Marton & Saljo, 1976; Posser, Trigwell, & Taylor, 1994). Developed within higher education research by higher education researchers, I consider it an innovative way to identify and explore the range of different ways on-reserve FNMI students experience specific learning in the TYP.

### **Phenomenography as a Research Methodology**

This study explores students' conceptions of their learnings with the objective to develop a TYP that is relevant, innovative and able to address their needs as learners. Researchers in Sweden in the early 1980s explored the ways that students experienced learning, developed phenomenography as a methodological approach (Larsson & Holmstrom, 2007) and since then it has become a standard tool.

Phenomenography as a research methodology is based on its association with higher education practice, seeking to improve the student learning experience for example, by enhancing teaching methods to increase students' engagement. It is used for identifying, formulating, and confronting certain research questions relevant to learning and understanding with the object of study being variations in the ways that aspects of the world have been experienced (Mann, 2009; Marton & Booth, 1997). For example, its application plays a major

role in suggesting to educational developers an agenda for researching and improving educational practice.

As I attempt to offer some insights concerning how to assist on-reserve FNMI learners in their transition to university, utilising phenomenography as a theoretical framework can help me to focus the research and direct my analysis. It differs from other approaches because the focus is on the interaction between the population being studied and the phenomenon. Unlike other research methodologies such as phenomenology or ethnography, phenomenography is designed to study variations in the experiences of different students and interpret these perspectives using interviews as the method of data collection (Marton & Saljo, 1976; Posser, Trigwell, & Taylor, 1994). It presumes that what is meant by what is said can be construed as representing a conception of the phenomenon that one is talking about in the interviews, as interpreted by the interviewer. The result is a description of the different conceptions concerning the phenomenon being researched, not an explanation of the reasons for the variations (Akerlind, 2012; Buck & Oakes, 2011; Marton, 1981; Larsson & Holmstrom, 2007; Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013). Typically, the number of variants identified on the basis of interviews of 20 or less is usually four or five (Tight, 2016).

### **Second-order Perspective**

In using phenomenography, I am not trying to classify the FNMI students' experiences, or compare them, in order to explain or to predict and make a particular judgment. Rather my aim is to describe the students' experiences so that readers can generate a second-order perspective (Richardson, 1999) regarding how the college TYP is understood by some on-reserve FNMI students.

The objective of the second-order perspective is to describe people's experience of various aspects of the world (Marton, 1981) with the main idea being that any phenomenon can be understood or experienced in limited numbers of qualitatively different ways. The second-order of the phenomenographic perspective considers both the conceptual and the experiential as well as what is thought of as that which is lived. The purpose is to describe, analyse, and understand experiences as well as characterising the variation in people's experiences, resulting in a second order principle or 'inside perspective' (Richardson, 1999, p. 57).

I will illustrate to readers the meaning of a second-order perspective. I could ask the participants of the study questions about what make some students succeed better than others in the college TYP. However, this would mean that I am entering into the investigation with my point of view on what 'success' means. Therefore, with interview questions that are carefully designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences, I chose to ask about their ideas on success in the TYP programme (or experiences of it). As the researcher, I make statements in very direct ways about the experiences and different perspectives they communicate. Their answers represent statements about their conceptions of reality and are referred to in phenomenography as a second order perspective or non-dualistic ontological perspective (Marton, 1981; Richardson, 1999).

Phenomenography is used to capture the essence of the variation of experiences of the phenomenon from a second-order perspective and yields a limited number of related, hierarchical categories of description of the variation (Marton & Booth, 1997). A first order perspective evaluates the correctness of the view presented, while a second order perspective accepts all points of view as important whether or not they are realistic. The second-order

categories of description are how the phenomenon in question is experienced (Kaapu, Saarenpaa, Tiainen, & Paakki, n.d.; Marton & Booth, 1997).

It is preferable that FNMI students' experiences in the on-reserve college transition programme be described from a second-order or experiential perspective since the first principle of Indigenous learning is experiential knowledge (Battiste, 2004) as discussed in the previous chapter. With a second-order perspective, we investigate students' learning experiences and whatever the learners believe they know contributes to their actions, beliefs and attitudes to learning (Marton, 1981). With phenomenography there is no correct approach to students' learning in the TYP, rather it is the meaning the students attach to their learning experiences that counts.

### **Assumptions of Phenomenography**

Although phenomenography arose from an empirical rather than a theoretical or philosophical perspective, in recent research, the epistemological and ontological assumptions and methodological requirements underlying the approach have emerged (Akerlind, 2012). Phenomenographic studies on learning and how students conceive phenomena, espouse a non-dualistic ontology instead of a positivist/objectivist approach that focuses on internal constructions by the participants (Marton & Booth, 1997). According to Yates, Partridge, and Bruce (2012), phenomenography is rooted in a non-dualist ontology (relational) whereby the person and the world are viewed in relation to each other instead of distinct objects. Marton and Booth (1997) were the first to ascribe the term 'non-dualistic' (p. 122) to these intimate relationships between the person and the world. Trigwell (2000) and Akerlind (2005), in emphasising the strength of the phenomenographic approach as a methodology to investigate students' experiences, also speak to its non-dualistic ontological perspective. They assert that

phenomenography not only provides a way of looking at phenomena holistically, but it also adopts a non-dualist qualitative, second-order perspective. It is this non-dualistic ontological characteristic of phenomenography that makes it fundamental to this study which assumes there is an inseparable relationship between FNMI students and aspects of their world. Using phenomenography as a research lens on on-reserve FNMI students in a college transition programme helps readers to understand the social phenomenon in a natural setting by emphasising the learners' meaning, views and experiences.

Phenomenography describes the participants' experiences, rather than addressing what people think. In addition, it describes the participants' experiences while treating all of these as valid and logical (Dahlin, 2007; Kinnunen & Simon, 2012; Marton, 1981; Yates, Partridge, & Bruce, 2012). It is unique in that it not only acts as a lens that focuses on the meaning of phenomenon but also adds to our understanding of people's conception of experiences (Barnard et al., 1999). In my research, the phenomenographic approach has the potential to generate outcomes that will add to the body of knowledge concerning how and what people understand about on-reserve FNMI learners and their transition to postsecondary education. I am justifying statements made in Chapter 2 regarding the Indigenous situation by highlighting the experiences and challenges that on-reserve learners face accessing a university education. An understanding of the social meaning of on-reserve FNMI students' particular situations is obtained by analysis of these students' discursive accounts of their experiences in their college TYP. For those who completed the TYP, they share what they think contributed to their success. Likewise, for those who did not complete the programme, they also share what they think made them unsuccessful. Since learning and teaching are two sides of the same coin, figuratively speaking, the inclusions of the teachers' perspectives of the FNMI learners' experiences in the TYP is very crucial in

exploring their learning outcome in the local college TYP. Since individuals interpret phenomena and human behaviours differently (Drill et al., 2012), it is imperative to include teachers' perspectives on the reasons why they believe that students are successful or unsuccessful. This should help to reinforce the students' responses as to why they are successful or unsuccessful.

Ultimately, I believe that phenomenography is effective in educational research because it focuses on ideas expressed by a group about ways of understanding. It validates arguments that one can experience/understand a phenomenon in limited numbers of qualitative different ways while not classifying them. While it values what is culturally learned, it does not pass judgment, explain or predict, which makes it an ideal methodology for exploring the students' voices.

### **The Outcome Space**

In a phenomenographic study, the result is referred to as an outcome space (Barnard et al., 1999; Richardson, 1999; Yates et al., 2012). The outcome space of a phenomenographic study contains a set of hierarchically structured categories of description of the phenomenon and students' natural understanding, while interpretations of the learning phenomena in the teaching-learning environment is known as conceptions of learning. The outcome space identifies critical variations in the collective experience of the group, and the variation of experiences is arranged hierarchically, ranging from a restricted focus to expansive views of their experiences.

Since the outcome space also depicts the voices of the participants, the first step in the process towards constituting the outcome space is to populate the pool of meaning with the collection of fragments from all the interviews that refer to an experience of the phenomenon (Collier-Reed & Ingerman, 2013). The quality of the outcome space is judged by two characteristics, the categories of description and the conceptions of learning.

It is essential that the classes in the categories of description ascribe clear, distinct things to the experience (Marton & Booth, 1997). They should be different enough so that each relates a particular way of experiencing the phenomenon and the categories should be able to stand in a logical relationship with each other in a hierarchical system. Each category must have distinctive conceptions that are close, and the relation between the categories must be clearly stated. Since they are at various echelons of individual experiences, they form a hierarchy of students' conceptions of their learning (Akerlind, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997). This ranking represents a transition from a less complete understanding to complete, more inclusive and more complex ways of experiencing the phenomenon.

### **Limitations of Phenomenographic Approach**

Phenomenography relies on interviewing in its processing of data and critics claim that one limitation of the approach is in the interviewing data collection method (Angen, 2000; Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997). The phenomenographic approach does not advocate the use of fully structured interview questions but instead relies on a semi-structured format. Therefore, the interviewer should be proficient in asking follow-up questions. The probing interview requires the interviewer to delve into each response and ask appropriate questions. Although this provides the opportunity to understand the participant more deeply, the interviewer has to be skilful at coming up questions on the spur of the moment.

According to Scond (1983), reflection is a difficult practice to develop; therefore, the role of the interviewer must be to assist the participants in the process of reflecting on their understanding and experiences by asking the appropriate follow-up questions at the right moment. This situation could lead to the interviewer asking too many or too few clarifying questions. Since I was aware that this could be a potential drawback, I tried to minimise my

probing and follow-up questions, keeping to the five key questions, “why, how, when, what, where?” if I needed them to clarify what they had said. If that was not sufficient for me to understand how the interviewees understood the concept, I then asked them to explain their meaning further. Without any developed ‘dialogue rules’ for interviewing (Francis, 1993, p. 72), this strategy was sufficient for me to maintain the focus of the interview as well as maintaining its depth and scope exploring how the students and teachers understood their experiences in the TYP.

The other limitation related to the above is that it only captures the given interviewee’s understanding of experience at a specific point in time. It is possible that if the study were to be conducted on another occasion, the responses could be different (Bucks & Oakes, 2011). The difference in the replies is shaped by interviewees’ experiences with the given phenomenon. For example, it is likely that if a participant is interviewed immediately after participating in the TYP, the response might be different compared to a few months after reflecting longer on the experience. In the research, each participant was interviewed over a year after completing the TYP. The possibility existed that their responses could differ if the interviews were conducted immediately after their TYP experience, however I believe that their interpretations about what the TYP experience meant and what they achieved would hardly change significantly from that moment and the time of the interview. It is for this reason that they were given time to reflect on the questions before making their responses.

Another limitation of the phenomenographic approach is the amount of time needed to conduct it (Bucks & Oakes, 2011). This study required the researcher to become very familiar with the transcripts. Creating the outcome spaces from the combined responses of the respondents reflects diversity and quality in terms of how they understand their experience in the



TYP and can be very time-consuming. After reading and rereading each transcript (an average of eight pages), it took several months to organise the themes into descriptive categories reflecting the different ways the transition programme is understood and experienced.

### **About the Researcher**

As a science teacher who emigrated from a Caribbean country in 2009, I found it intriguing to teach indigenous students who have a culture and history that bore some similarities to my own. Coming from Jamaica, which was once under colonial rule, I could identify with the FNMI students' pedagogical challenges in relation to Eurocentric thinking in the Canadian education system. Before we achieved independence in 1962, students in Jamaica experienced similar challenges as the FNMI. However, after adapting a Caribbean curriculum, teaching and learning in Jamaica and the other Caribbean countries was enhanced, resulting in improved performance at all levels.

Having experienced how knowing our students and configuring instructions to connect with their interests and culture can create improvement in their education, I decided to conduct phenomenographic research on the TYP at Askihk College. As a high school teacher, I built a reciprocal relationship with the community college by keeping the lines of communication open with the teachers to consult on pedagogical matters. My role as a teacher kept me involved in the community activities and I was able to voice my desire to the Elders and community leaders to embark on the study. In the Indigenous culture, the Elders are keepers of tradition, guardians of culture, the wise people, and the teachers (Simpson, 2002). They are held in high esteem and are highly respected and must be included, supported and looked upon to provide guidance and direction for teachers and students. After discussing how my research would contribute to

teaching and learning in the college with the director of Askihk and a former chief, I was granted permission to conduct this study on on-reserve students' experiences in the TYP (Appendix A).

It is important to consider how the participants and the wider community view the researcher and the different elements that influence both power relations between researcher and participants and the researcher's positioning (Mulligan, 2016). I would like to highlight the importance of power and privilege and how my participants view me as a researcher from outside the community, and more specifically from another cultural background. As someone whose ancestry is connected with those of the First Peoples of the Caribbean and those who were brought there from Africa, India and China by the Europeans, I also received my formal education experience through a colonial lens. While *my* experience under a Eurocentric education system of education was a plurality of western ways of knowing and being, interlinked with non-western Caribbean heritage and culture, I was able to empathise with the educational experiences of the FNMI students. As an outsider, who was also educated in disciplinary-centred approaches to teaching and learning, it was my genuine interest coupled with an attitude of openness and wonder that essentially inspired me to explore the community's lived experiences in depth.

Although I am considered an 'outsider' by way of cultural and racial difference, I adopted an 'insider' identity on a professional level in the research. My role as an insider is defined by how my participants and others involved in the study view me. I believe that my advantage was that I was a teacher first, respected in the community and by my co-workers and students. I grew to love and respect the students in the high school, and I believe that I had earned the trust and respect of them as well as the teachers and the community in general. That placed me at an advantage and in a powerful position as a researcher since my participants

already viewed caring (Kempel, & Holmes, 1986; Kempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985) and me as being predictable, dependable. These are important attributes necessary for establishing mutual trust, namely their willingness to share their experiences and my dependence on the trust of the participants to listen to their stories.

I might be overemphasising my position as an insider but the members of the community whom I work with, my peers and my students see me as more than just a researcher, and more like a friend. Due to my position as teacher and peer, I had a strong friendship with the participants and was in a position of having knowledge and experiences of, and relationships in, the college. Having this position as an insider not only dissolves the boundaries between me, the researcher and the researched, but established an atmosphere of equity that assisted me as I sought to uncover people's views and perspectives in this phenomenographic study. Some critiques claim that creating an atmosphere of equity may conceal power differences and hence be ethically questionable (Birkmann & Kvale, 2005). It can be argued that it would have been almost impossible to gain mutual trust and rich descriptions of the participants' experiences if they believed that I was superior and not genuinely empathic and caring.

This interpretive study – generally inductive in nature – typically supports the interview approach to data gathering and analysis. During the interview stage, the researcher is dependent on the participants' willingness, not only to take part, but also to share their experiences and thoughts about the topics in question (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009). I credit my personal experience teaching and working with the students and teachers in the community with the ability to develop more authentic knowledge construction within the interviews. It is the years of teaching and observing students that were the key attributes in providing rich evidence

and the offering of justifiable and credible accounts as I generated meanings from the data through inductive reasoning in the analysis.

While I strove for objectivity and neutrality, I also recognise that I can never attain this fully since my ontological stance acknowledges the importance of personal interpretations regarding my participants' perspectives alongside my understanding and portrayal of their views. To overcome personal bias, I do not focus on individuals' responses whenever I translate the transcribed responses from the participants in the semi-structured interviews, but I focus on the phenomenon and the descriptions of the participants' lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon (Larsson & Holmstrom, 2007). Since I am using a phenomenographic approach, I accept that the social world of on-reserve FNMI learners is accessible through my respondents' interpretation, which is further interpreted by me. It, therefore, stands to reason why I consider the interpretivist approach to be critical. Looking through two different lenses – a teacher and a researcher makes it easier to search for patterns. In addition, I analyse and develop explanations for such patterns as I explore the experiences of these students because of shared experiences as both an insider and outsider.

### **The Background and Study Participants**

This research was conducted to explore FNMI students' conceptions of their experiences in an on-reserve community college TYP, thereby gaining some insights on why they believe their college TYP might not be meeting the goals of enabling them to access university. In Kiwetin, FNMI students who aspired to a postsecondary education before 2011 had to leave the community to attend universities in the city. Once accepted into these universities, they were required to complete a transition programme for a year before starting the bachelor programme. From my observation as a teacher at the high school for over three years, the problem was that

high school graduates who left for the city universities experienced a 100 percent dropout rate from the university and did not even start the bachelor programme.

According to an Elder and past chief in the community (personal communication, April 2014), to address the dropout problem as well as to increase the success rate of on-reserve students qualifying for university, the Band councillors established a college transition programme at the existing Askihk Community College. In partnership with a university in the city, the TYP was offered to high school graduates so that they were able to remain on the reserve as they transitioned to a postsecondary institution. To alleviate the socioeconomic burden on a given family, financial assistance or a stipend was provided to cover tuition for each high school graduate. The stipend is given one time with the expectation that a student should complete the TYP within a year. Also, and as an incentive to motivate the graduates, the Indian Band, offered PSSSP (Postsecondary Student Support Programme) to any student who completed the TYP at Askihk College to access their university education (H. Warner-Brown, personal communication, September 26, 2012)

### **Askihk Community College**

With funding from the federal government of Canada in partnership with the province's hydroelectric power company, Askihk was officially opened in 2006 to provide jobs and training initiatives for a proposed regional hydroelectric project. Originally, it offered postsecondary training in trades and technology, driver education, financial accounting and management to the community as well as other neighbouring Indigenous communities in the northern part of the province (J. Moore, personal communication, April 2014). Although the goal of the community college was to facilitate postsecondary vocational training, it was also committed to educating the people of the community with the knowledge required to engage in further academic

pursuits. Hence, three years after its official opening, according to Moore, the Education Authority added the college TYP at Askihk College to be accessible to those high school graduates who expressed a desire to attend a university. The TYP began in 2011 with a cohort of two students. The next year the number increased to four students and, in the year that followed, only one student enrolled making seven local high school graduates up to the time of the commencement of this study. Six of the seven students were available to participate in the study.

### **Structure of the TYP**

The TYP was known as the University 1 Programme and it lasted for two semesters per academic year. The programme consisted of five courses in the classroom and one distance-learning course from an affiliated university (H. Warner-Brown, Personal interview, September 26, 2012). Each semester offered three credits, making it a total of six credits in English Composition, Mathematics Skills, University Skills, Introduction to University, New Directions in History, and Computer Studies. The instruction was based on three models – traditional face-to-face teaching, modular-based instruction, and a computer-based system. Face-to-face teaching was used in English Composition, Mathematics Skills, University Skills, Computer and New Direction in History. The Introduction to University course was taught using modular-based instruction and tutorials were delivered by video streaming to computers in their classrooms.

### **Ethical Considerations**

At the proposal stage of my research, I consulted the Education Authority in the community to discuss my interest in conducting a study on the experiences of the students in the TYP. I was given a letter (Appendix B) by the director of Askihk permitting me to perform this study. Much of the work was undertaken in the formulation of the questions that were to guide the interview with the participants during the proposal stage. The research proposal as well data

collection tools were submitted to the University of Liverpool Ethics Committee for approval before the start of the research. The ethical approval process was rigorous whereby each criterion laid out by the University of Liverpool had to be adequately addressed by the researcher before beginning the research. Appendix A is a copy of the ethics approval letter showing that the study met with the approval and complied with the University's regulations and stipulations.

After the first stage of receiving the approval from the University of Liverpool's Ethics Committee, contact was made with the participants face-to-face as well as by telephone, Skype, and email. Before any collection of data and meetings began, however, each participant provided their consent form (Appendix C) in agreement with what was required of them. During and after the interview process, the protocols established by the Ethics Committee to ensure that there would be no ethical problems in relation to the participants were adhered to. It is important that I emphasise that pseudonyms are used for the participants as well as any location mentioned in the study. The use of pseudonyms is to protect the identities of the interviewees and they were assured that the interview transcripts were going to be stored in a password-secured file in my office.

### **The Participants**

Compared to other TYPs in universities in the province, the on-reserve programme had a small cohort of students and local teachers, therefore, it was expected that the number of participants would be low as well. The students are my primary participants and, based on their high school diploma, they were all eligible for entry into the college TYP. They entered the TYP from September 2011 (the first year) to September 2014 (the third year). In Spring 2011, six students graduated from the high school while two enrolled in the first TYP programme in September 2011. The following year, there were eight high school graduates and four enrolled in

the programme in September 2012. In 2013 there were only four postsecondary graduates and one student enrolled in the TYP. From September 2011 to 2013, a total of seven high school graduates enrolled in the on-reserve college TYP.

In 2014, six students representing the three years and two local teachers accepted my invitation to participate in this research on students' experiences. A copy each of the student and teacher participation information sheet can be seen in Appendix D and Appendix E respectively. Although seven students in total enrolled, one removed from the community after completing the programme. There were three instructors in the TYP who were also invited to participate in the study; however, one resigned unexpectedly a few weeks before the proposal stage of the study. Since he was no longer living in the community, he could not be a participant and it took several weeks to replace him, therefore only two teachers were able to partake in the study.

The student population consists of all Indigenous people living on the reserve between the ages of 18-21. Three female students – Maskwa, Mikisew and Mahekan – and two males – Amisk and Atihk – have been living on the reserve all their lives. Also living on the reserve are the two local non-Indigenous teachers, one female – Anne Bronte – and one male – Bob Denard. Although my sample of eight participants appears to be quite small, Bowden and Green (2005) propose that in a phenomenographic research this is permissible. The number of interview participants allowed should be sufficient to ascertain variation in the ways in which people experience situations and phenomena, but not so many that it makes the data difficult to control.

### **Profile of students**

Since phenomenography studies the diversity of students' understanding (Marton & Booth, 1997), identifying variety in the students' experience is vital to this study. Although I taught all the students who participated in the study at some point during their high school



experience, the profile of each student was established from the data shared by the participants as they spoke about themselves during the interviews. This profile provides information about the given family's education, professional ambitions, and what the student was doing at the time of the study. Table 1 summarises the profile of each student and is followed by a detailed description that should offer readers a deeper understanding of the students' background.

Table 1. A Profile of the Student Participants

Name and gender	Family members completed PSE*	Career goal	Status at the end of TYP	Current position
<b>Mahekan</b> Female	All	Medical doctor	Passed 3 courses Repeated Passed all 6	Working and studying. Planning to go to university.
<b>Wapask</b> Male	None	Therapist	Passed 1 course Repeated Passed 2 more	Online studies. Planning to complete TYP in the city.
<b>Maskwa</b> Female	Two	Royal Canadian Mounted Force (RCMP) Officer	Dropped out	Working. Waiting to hear from RCMP training school
<b>Mikisew</b> Female	None	Bachelor of Education	Passed 3 courses Repeated Passed 1 more	Working. Planning to complete TYP in the city.
<b>Amisk</b> Male	Two	Nurse	Passed all 6 Completed	University
<b>Atihk</b> Male	One	Teacher	Passed all 6 Completed	Working

\*PSE means postsecondary education and pseudonyms are used for the names of students and places

Atihk is the first male student of two high school graduates who enrolled at Askihk that year and he was also a study participant. In addition, he was the first male to complete the programme within one academic year. He attributed his success to being a good student who was always ready to learn. His ambition is to become a teacher of mathematics because of his love of the subject and he wanted to complete the transition programme so that he could go to the

university to become a teacher. He claimed that his reason for receiving good marks was that he was prepared for classes all the time, completed his work on time, and took all the advice that his teachers offered. His greatest challenges were the copious writing that he had to do, bearing in mind that he was a 'math person' alongside ensuring that he did not miss the due dates. His greatest strength was that he persevered and managed to get through the programme.

Atihk's family and friends played major roles in supporting him financially and otherwise. He said that he wanted to pursue the course in Kiwetin because he was around people he knew and whom he felt had high expectations of him. That motivated him even more to make it through the TYP. Experiencing the TYP near his family was better for him than if he had to leave to undertake the programme in the city. At the time of the study, Atihk worked as an education assistant to the math teacher at the high school. At the time of the interview, he planned to enrol in a city university the following year.

Wapask is another male participant from the group of high school students who graduated and started in the TYP the programme in its second year. He was not sure what he wanted to do when he enrolled in the programme, therefore, he did not have a career goal at that time. He was dissatisfied that the courses offered were not only mandatory but there were also limited choices. Although he found the teachers to be patient, he had a difficult time understanding the work. The challenges for him included accessing the library resources while he did not seek the help of the teachers, so he failed to meet the deadlines several times.

In addition, Wapask reported that he did not lack social sustenance because he received motivational, emotional and spiritual support from his family. Halfway through the first academic year, however, he had financial obligations that required that he work while attending

classes at Askihk College. He began employment at the community's gas station to become more financially independent. The work hours were unusual, so he did not get time to study.

Wapask was not successful during the first year, so he repeated another year at the TYP at Askihk College. Two years after starting the TYP, he was still unsuccessful as he failed to complete the courses. He said that his failure to complete the course successfully was a result of poor study skills, poor time management and missing deadlines. At the time of the interview, he was still working and planning to continue the TYP in a city university. He believed that the experience in the TYP enlightened him a little as to what university life would be like. Wapask was also going to register for an online course in psychology.

Maskwa was a female member of the second group of students who enrolled in the TYP. She indicated that she received sound financial and social support from her family and community members, who encouraged her to go through with the TYP. She graduated from high school in June and started the TYP in the fall of that year. She did not have any career goals when she enrolled in the programme, and she was the only one who voluntarily dropped after the first few months. Maskwa said that she did not feel that she was smart enough for university and gave up trying. She said that she wanted more one-on-one encounters and communication with the teachers. Maskwa found that it was hard to keep up with writing the essay assignments and gradually fell behind in her work until she just stopped going to class. She finally dropped out of the TYP after two months and at the time of the interview; she was working in the community while she waited for a call from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) training department to join the force.

The third male, Amisk, graduated from high school in the second year of the programme and completed the TYP at the end of that academic year. At the time of the interview, Amisk was

accepted to a university in another province. He was already enrolled in an undergraduate programme that was to start the following fall. In addition, Amisk was the only successful male from the second group of secondary school students who enrolled in the TYP. He described himself as success-driven with a mature attitude. He wanted to become a nurse and attributed part of his success to being attentive during high school and from an early stage he was responsible for his learning. Initially, he did not like the TYP because he found that it was not challenging enough and he was unsure if the concepts he learned in the programme were going to help him in university. At one stage, he took things too easy, started to procrastinate and nearly failed some of his courses. Amisk also said that he looked at the attitude of some of his peers who were not taking the programme seriously and decided to take charge of his success. He saw the bigger picture – namely his career goal – and he knew that if he did not get through the TYP, he was unlikely to get sponsorship from the Band Council to attend university.

Amisk also attributed his academic success to his supportive family. He was happy that the TYP afforded him the benefit of undertaking the programme in the comfort of his home. He learnt to be more independent given the protection of his community and he made a commitment to give back to when he completed postsecondary education.

Mikisew, another female student, tried three times to complete the programme since she started. At the time of the interview, she had already repeated the TYP both at Askihk College and then on the campus of a city university. She completed some courses and was looking for work because she no longer qualified Band sponsorship to begin her university degree.

Her career goal was in education, but she was unsure if she wanted to become a teacher. Mikisew enjoyed her native language Cree and the Native Studies. She said that when she started the TYP, she felt she was well prepared to write papers but she also found it difficult. Nobody

was there to push her to do the work, and she did not have the motivation to do it on her own. The college did not offer a variety of exciting courses to choose from and she was unmotivated. In addition, she found some of her teachers to be interesting, but they could include more activities in the classes to make them easier to understand.

Mikisew enjoyed social support from her family but because she repeated the programme, she had to find a job in Kiwetin during the second year. That proved to be very stressful as she tried to balance studying with awkward job hours. Nonetheless, she ascribed her lack of academic success to poor time management and not planning her work. Besides, Misikew's lack of motivation was also a factor that led to her not completing the course and even after trying a second year, she was still unsuccessful. At the time of the interview, Mikisew was not sure what she was going to do.

In the third year since the inception of the TYP, Mahekan was the only high school student who enrolled in the programme. Her aspiration was to become a medical doctor, and she was headed for academic success until it halted prematurely five months into the programme when she became pregnant and dropped out. Due to a difficult pregnancy, she had to move to the city. She tried to continue the TYP at the university in the city after the birth of her child but that was very challenging, and she did not complete that year. Nevertheless, through perseverance, she returned to Kiwetin to complete the TYP. Going to the city was an eye-opener for her as the change in environment led to other personal challenges that were not present when she was attending the TYP at Askihk. For example, commuting to classes and taking care of her baby made it more difficult and she was unable to stay on top of the programme. At the time of the interview, Mahekan was back in Kiwetin and working to obtain finances to fulfil her ambition to

become a medical doctor. She was already enrolled in a medical programme in a northern college.

Despite the existence and role of the TYP on the reserve, only two males out of six students who participated in this study completed the course within a year and one female completed it within two years. One of the successful males transitioned to university and the other male works as an education assistant in the classroom. The successful female is now attending another college before pursuing her medical career. For one reason or another, three students did not complete the TYP.

### **Profile of teacher participants**

The two teacher participants who volunteered in the study are Caucasian and they spoke about their roles in the college programme during the interview. They are also the two longest serving teachers in Askihk. The female teacher, Anne Bronte, teaches English Composition and assists in some administrative duties. Bob Denard is the male teacher and the TYP's academic coordinator. He not only teaches History but also provides most of the student-related support. These two teachers are always available to students, even outside of prescribed teaching hours.

Askihk College employed Bob Denard at the same time that the college instituted the TYP. He has a master's degree in history and he is currently at the dissertation stage of his doctoral programme at an online university. He oversees the distance computer-based programme that is delivered from the city university. Denard teaches in the TYP and he also lectures in the programme for mature students at Askihk Community College. He negotiated his contract so that he had fifty percent of his workload dedicated to the university and fifty percent of that time for preparation and office hours. Denard also practised an open-door policy whereby his students can visit him anytime, provided he was in the building or not teaching a class.

The other teacher, Anne Bronte, began her career at Askihk before the TYP started enrolling high school graduates in the TYP. She was a teacher in the Mature Students Programme and was assigned as the English Language Arts teacher for the TYP when it was initiated. She is highly qualified in her discipline with a master's degree in English Language Art and assists Denard with teaching the computer-based programme. As an administrator, she is responsible for administering diagnostic tests to incoming students at the beginning of each academic school year to determine their readiness for the programme.

### **Method of Data Collection and Analysis**

While the methodology is the discipline or body of knowledge, the research methods are the techniques or processes that we use to conduct our research (McGregor & Murnane, 2010). As postulated by Marton and Booth (1997), phenomenographic data collection and data analysis go hand-in-hand. The phenomenographic approach adopted in this research explain the explorative characteristic of the data collection and the data's analytical treatment (Ashwin, 2006). Critiques from the positivistic and quantitative traditions question the explorative and interpretive nature of phenomenography because it relies on interpretive methods such as interviewing and analytic processing of the data (Angen, 2000; Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997). Although the study is interpretive, its validity is not in question as accepted theoretical practices are used. Interviews are well founded based on the assumption that subjective accounts of people are valid in qualitative scientific research. The inductive approach to data analysis, including the themes, categories and codes, all derive from the data and not pre-existing theory. In turn, the iterative nature of the analysis process leads to a close connection between the data and resulting theory (Kinnunen & Simon, 2013).

### **Data Collection**

The important principle in data collection is that the researcher focuses on the phenomenon as it appears to the participants. In the phenomenographic approach, identification of the participants is typically deliberate and non-random since there is a strong emphasis on 'information richness'. Although there is no prescribed sample size, it must, however, be manageable and sufficient to allow for findings reflecting variations and different experiences (Yates, Partridge, & Bruce, 2012).

### **The Interview Process**

The circumstances in which the interview is conducted is critical. That is, the situation and the relationship between the interviewer and the participant affect the interview process and results. I allowed the participants to choose the interview location as well as ensuring that I created a friendly environment and made participation voluntary for my interviewees as outlined in the ethical requirements stipulated by the University of Liverpool (see Appendix A). The surroundings in which the interview is carried out, as well as the interview's delivery and interpretation, affect what the participants say and how they say it (Kaapa et al., n.d.). Hence, it is important to maintain a trusting and relaxed atmosphere while clarifying issues to get the best responses possible.

The primary method for data collection in phenomenography is face-to-face interviews (Ackerlind, 2005; Yates, Partridge, & Bruce, 2012), and that was precisely the method used for this research. The interviews were undertaken with the assistance of predetermined questions (see Appendices F and G) designed to explore the participants' perceptions of their experiences in the transition programme. The students were asked personal information about themselves and their families relevant to the study and to reflect on what the experiences meant to them. Sets of questions similar to those posed to the students were directed to the teacher participants.



The semi-structured interviews with the six students and two Askihk Community College teachers generated all of the data needed in this study. As the students and teachers reflected on their experiences and perceptions of the TYP as guided by the questions in Appendices F and G, their responses were recorded with the participants' permission in the interview and later transcribed verbatim. During the interview, the analysis process also started with the search for variation in patterns in the responses using probing questions. Wherever and whenever it was appropriate, I invited the participants to explain their understanding further, offering examples where possible to make clear the intent and language of the interview. Necessary clarifications and expansion through extended questions were made to clarify any ambiguities in their answers.

The students were asked questions about their family and community, their past and present experiences in high school and college, their academic and extracurricular activities as well as their ambition and future aspirations. Their answers provided information about how they feel about their experiences at home and in the community. They could also include the reasons why they chose to enrol in the on-reserve TYP instead of the city university's TYP and whether it was better for them to have the transition programme in their community rather than travelling to the city. They were also asked about their family, peers, and the experiences they had in high school, in the programme of study and the institution. The purpose of asking these questions was to gain an understanding of their learning experiences and explore if there were differences and similarities for different students in the college year programme.

Using the interview guide in Appendix G, the teachers were asked details about the courses they taught. They answered questions about any other roles they have in the institutions. The questions were designed for the teachers to share their perspectives on the students' experiences while they were in the college. They explained about their perspectives on the TYP

and why they think some students were successful while others were not. They elaborated on their experiences with the students and what they believe could have improved the students' experiences.

The highlight of my interviewing experience was capturing the variations of the meaning of the TYP by exploring their thinking in greater depths without leading the participants (Trigwell, 2000). It is the variation of the experiences and conceptions of learning that is the focus of this study. Analysis began as soon as the first person was interviewed and continued after finishing all the interviews, interpreting each transcript in the group context while searching for similarities and differences compared to other transcripts.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

As mentioned previously, central to phenomenography is its non-dualist, second order perspective with the aim to describe key aspects of variations in the experience of a given phenomenon. Learning, however, occurs within a context, which is why this study includes a thematic breakdown to help readers understand the issues of the FNMI learner in their unique environment. This thematic analysis should not in any way detract from the results of the phenomenographic analysis, which are a limited number of internally and logically related, qualitatively different, hierarchical categories of description of variations in the way the students experience the TYP.

Embracing phenomenography as a methodology means that there is no need to draw on anecdotal evidence to support claims; however, research on students' experiences and conceptions of learning assists readers to contextualise the experiences of the participating students. Phenomenography is used in this study to describe the significant features of the different ways individuals experience the TYP while it does not preclude the use of other

analytical tools while other such tools are used to emphasise the unique experience of the FNMI learner while acting as an appropriate triangulation technique (Lincoln & Guba, 2003).

Qualitative data analysis is a rigorous and logical process through which data are given meaning (Gray, 2012). Thematic analysis is a foundational method for qualitative analysis that is flexible, useful and can potentially provide rich and detailed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) while it is included in this study to highlight the students' backgrounds further while they were attending Askihk College.

The approach adopted for this study is induction analysis, which involves the collection and analysis of data from individuals to identify patterns and for the development of conceptual categories (Sjostrom, & Dahlgren, 2002). The process consists of reviewing the transcripts of the interviews and, at the transcript level, sorting each one into categories based on their similarities and differences. I read and reread all the transcripts and categorised the responses according to observable themes, a process that Marton (1994, cited in Richardson, 1999), concluded could serve a pedagogical purpose. The emerging categories represent the voice of the students in a thematic way and were regrouped and refined until they could be said to represent as faithfully as possible the nature of the participants' experiences.

### **Deriving the themes using Thematic Networks Tool**

Since students' voices and perspectives are the essence of this study and the derived themes are based on salient issues that arose in the participant interviews, a pragmatic approach to the thematic analysis involved applying an appropriate hermeneutic analytical instrument called the thematic networks tool (Attride-Sterling, 2011) (see Fig. 5). Using the thematic networks tool facilitated the structuring and depiction of the themes by systematically summarising the responses and ideas identified from the interviews. Used as an efficient research

strategy in the qualitative analysis of another small-scale study conducted within a tight timeframe (Mitchell, 2015), thematic networks are only tools in analysis, not the analysis itself. This approach to analysis does not have a direct relationship to phenomenography. Once a thematic network has been constructed, it serves as an organising principle and a pictorial representation of the responses' interpretation. The networks are presented graphically as web-like nets to remove any notion of hierarchy, providing thematic fluidity while emphasising the network's interconnectivity. The analysis of the themes identified in the study precedes the phenomenographic approach, which is the main basis of exploring variations in the experiences of Askihk College students.

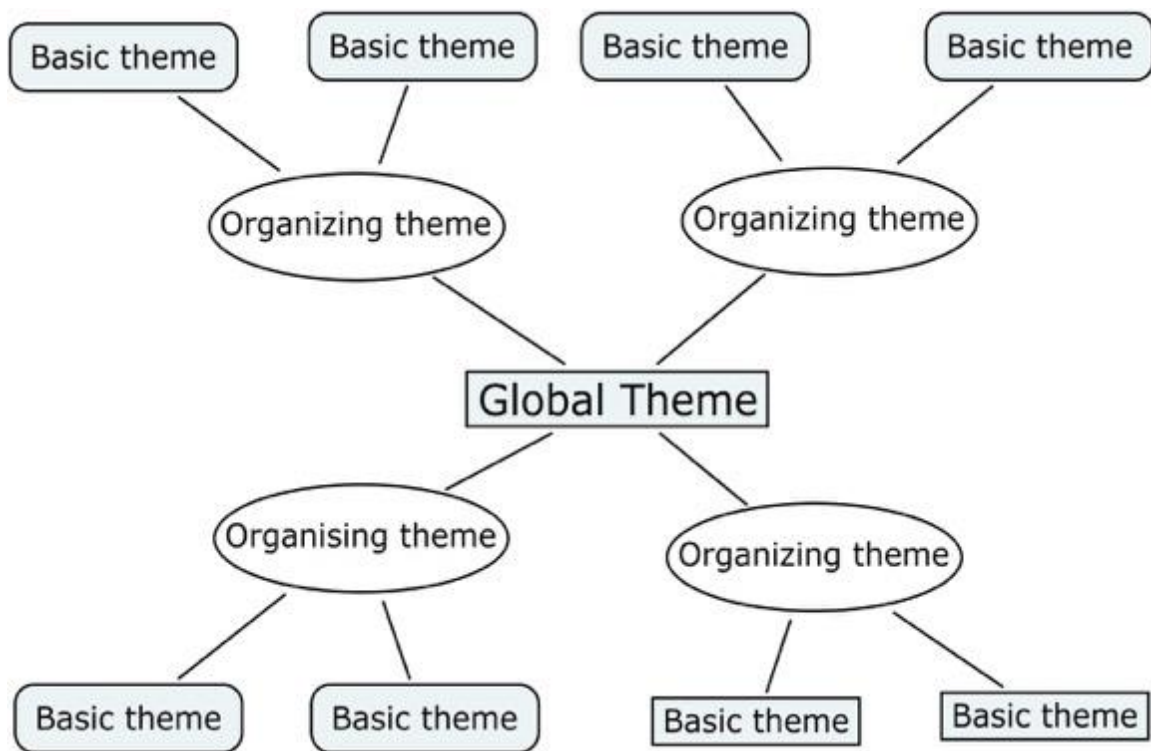


Figure 5. Thematic networks, the thematic tool used for the data themes (adapted from Attride-Sterling, 2011, p. 388).

After an initial reading of the interview transcripts and while reflecting constantly on the research questions, I searched for an overall pattern that allowed me to identify and describe the significant ways in which the students experience the TYP. Interpreting each transcript involved searching for similarities and differences within the context of the group. The thematic network tool (Attride-Sterling, 2011) is simply a way of organising the themes in the thematic analysis as I sought to unearth the dominant themes in the data at different levels. It facilitated the structuring and depiction of these themes as I looked at variations in gender, age group, student, teacher or any patterns identified in the group.

The process of deriving themes starts from the lowest order theme, the basic themes and working inwards toward a global theme. Once a collection of basic themes is obtained, they are then classified according to the underlying story they are telling, and these become the organising themes. Organising themes are then reinterpreted in light of their basic themes and are brought together to illustrate a single conclusion or super-ordinate theme that becomes the global theme. For example, some basic themes I identified from the students' responses were sponsorship, career goals, geographical location, and teacher support.

### **Reduction and breakdown of the data**

The first stage of the thematic network analysis involves breaking down or reducing the voice of the students by using two steps, devising a code structure and dissecting the text using the structure (Attride-Sterling, 2011). Devising the coding structure is derived from the issues mentioned by the participants and the phenomenon that the study wants to explore. It involves dividing the transcripts into single words and phrase repetitions that are meaningful and manageable. The process of deriving themes starts from the lowest order themes called 'basic themes' and working inwards toward a 'global theme'.

After reading through the transcripts several times, and dissecting and classifying the data, I identified 36 basic codes shown in Appendix H. Clusters of basic themes centred on larger ones, while shared issues are grouped according to the hidden story the data is telling and these then become the organising themes. The latter were then interpreted according to their basic themes and were brought together to illustrate the global theme. The global theme summarises the basic and organising themes and forms the main points of concern deduced from the responses of the students and the teachers. Appendix I shows how the students and teachers' responses were broken down into basic, organising, and global themes to form a thematic network.

### **Exploration of the data**

The exploration of the findings to make sense of the data is the second stage of the thematic analysis. In this stage, the networks are described and explored by going back to each transcript, but rather than reading these in a linear manner, the text is now read in a sequential order, through the global, organising, and basic themes respectively. The thematic network can also be read clockwise to facilitate the presentation of the responses as well as the reader's understanding of the data.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter looked at the purpose of using the qualitative phenomenographic approach to explore variations in the on-reserve students' experiences and their approaches to learning in a local college TYP. According to Guba and Lincoln (2003), qualitative research embraces different ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. The ontological position adopted in this study is that students construct meaning in different ways, requiring inductive strategies and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis to interpret. The

epistemological approach is that all meanings are considered valid and open to interpretation. The iterative and comparative processes of analysis involved in phenomenography offer insights into the qualitatively different ways these on-reserve students understand teaching and learning in the TYP. Phenomenography does not preclude the use of thematic analysis, which was also used as a foundational method to highlight the students' voices. Complementing phenomenography with a thematic approach makes the results of the study credible, fitting, auditable and conformable when judging for trustworthiness. In the next chapter, I will report on the findings and data analysis while discussing how to make sense of the information.

## **CHAPTER 4. STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES**

### **Introduction**

In most qualitative research, the first goal of qualitative data analysis is to reduce the responses to manageable and comprehensible proportions by breaking down the responses in a way that attempts to respect the quality of the data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). In this chapter, I explore the themes that emerged from the in-depth data which was gathered from the questions asked in the semi-structured interviews (Appendices F and G). To give readers a thorough understanding of the background of the on-reserve FNMI students, a thematic analysis was presented to identify major themes that represent the experiences of these students in the TYP at Askihk College. Including the contextual factors helps in understanding these FNMI students' experiences, therefore, the themes set the next stage for the phenomenographic analysis of the data.

### **Exploring the Themes that Emerged from the Responses**

Although phenomenography the methodological approach taken to describe the different ways the students experience the TYP, readers can get a better understanding of the how these FNMI learners feel by observing the themes that emerged from the interviews. Readers will recall that earlier, in the literature review, a student's experience was defined as the total interactions that the student has with the learning institution (Temple & Grove, 2014). The exploration of the students' voices using the thematic analysis identified five factors that affect students' experiences as shown in Figures 4.1 to 4.4. These factors emerged as the major themes of the study, and include external factors such as institutional and sectoral issues, and those dynamics unique to the learners such as student factors and academic adjustment.



Although the literature claims that gender, transgender issues and ethnicity are other factors in the students' experience (Deter, 2015; Jones et al., 2016), there was no indication from the interviews that gender or age had a significant bearing on the experiences of these FNMI students. All the students grew up together in the same community – namely, Kiwentin – with similar socioeconomic backgrounds and it was irrelevant to them that two students identified themselves as transgender. They have been quite close since kindergarten after which they attended the same schools, so there is little variation in the age range of nineteen to twenty-one years.

### **External Factors**

According to Alhassan (2012), external factors are conditions or variables originating outside the classroom that influence the experience of the student. The findings from the answers given in the interview transcripts show that students' experiences at Askihk were influenced by different variables that are not under the control of the student but can have a positive or negative effect on their teaching-learning experiences. Figure 4.1 shows an example of how the thematic network is created from the responses to question 3, Appendix F, and question 1, Appendix G. Firstly, family, friends, job, allowance, communication, social passing, library and extra-curricular activities were identified as the basic themes. I further organised these into social support, financial support, related institutions and resources. These organising themes form the 'external factor affecting student experience', which is the global theme. Reading outward from the basic theme, it reads, 'family, friends, job, allowance, extracurricular, library, social passing and communication' are part of the social, financial, resource, and related institutional support that make up the external factors in the students' experiences.

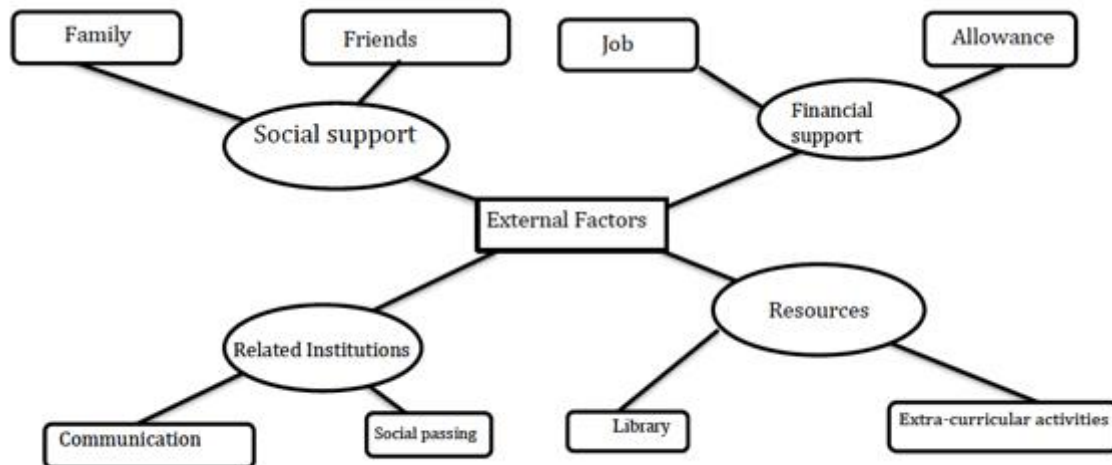


Figure 4.1 Thematic network for external factors that affect students' experiences

Factors external to Askihk College such as social support, financial support, resources and related institutions can affect the students' beliefs, attitudes, and decisions they made during the transition experience. In this TYP, both the students and teachers responded that family, friends, job, and their ability to access tuition allowances affected their experiences at the college. Table 2 (Appendix K) shows some examples of the responses of students and teachers based on the interviews that were conducted during the data collection. What is interesting in the comments is how the family and the community seem to be the key external factors that impact the lives of these students.

Successful students like Atihk spoke a lot about the support of his family and friends throughout the programme. He said, "I did not have to leave the community. I did not have to leave my family. I got money from family, sponsorship and welfare". It is possible that the social, emotional and financial support he received from his family and community could account for his success. At the same time, there are other students such as Wapask and Mikisew who had the social support of their family while financial support was limited.

Once a student decided to repeat the programme, he or she was withdrawn from receiving the monthly stipends, a fixed regular sum of money allocated by the Band as an allowance for tuition. Wapask is of one two students who repeated the programme and although he too had the social support of his mother (who was the sole breadwinner), she could not afford to pay for his tuition. He stated, "I was working at the gas station, which gives me unusual hours so I didn't get time to study. I was no longer getting money from the band or and my mom didn't have it you know". The job presented challenges for his study experience because he started to miss his classes and was not fully engaged in his study (Irfan & Shabana, 2012). This possibly impacted negatively on his approach to learning, resulting in Wapask not successfully completing the programme for the second time.

Mikisew was the other student who faced financial challenges because she was not academically successful the first year of the TYP and had to work while repeating her studies the second year. "Without the stipend from the band I had to support myself the second time round by working odd times in the community".

There were factors outside the control of Askihk College that impacted on the experiences of both teachers and students and, at some points, made studying more enjoyable and less frustrating for those students who were successful or somewhat of a challenge for those who were not successful. For example, the students who had the social, emotional and financial support of their family and friends during the programme formed positive experiences. The motivation provided by their families and the community ensured the social support they needed to be successful. For instance, a few felt that receiving allowances (stipends) from the Band Council was assurance of adequate financial support while they studied and felt encouraged. When the allowances were no longer available for some students it resulted in difficult financial

circumstances that forced them to seek jobs to pay for their tuition. These students were unable to balance both school and jobs effectively and felt that the situation negatively affected their academic performance and contributed to them being unsuccessful.

As for the teachers, they were concerned that the lack of adequate resources and extra-curricular activities lessened the quality of the programme's teaching and learning. Mr. Denard was clearly concerned when he said, "... there is also the social aspect. There is nothing in the community to promote social building and leadership...".

Speaking as an insider, the teachers were concerned that there was a lack of sports or opportunities for volunteering for the students to widen their social circles and connecting with like-minded students in other institutions or becoming involved with others in the community. They believed that extracurricular activities could have promoted proper time management skills and develop leadership opportunities. Even the university in partnership with the college did not provide the proper academic guidance that the students needed in the terms of the delivery of distance learning courses. In this sense, the teachers perceived that the lack of a community programme or a properly administered volunteer programme (Benckendorff et al, 2009); Gregorio, Farrington & Page, 2000) constituted external factors that affected the progress of the students in the TYP. Both students and teachers believed that there were variables outside the control of the college that influenced their experiences in the programme. These findings are consistent with the literatures regarding the impact of external factors on students' performance. For instance, financial stress has a negative impact on academic performance (Irfan & Shabana, 2012; Raychaudury et al., 2010).

## Student Factors

Non-cognitive factors that influence students' experiences are known as student factors (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008). From the answers given to questions 4 – 9 in Appendix F, and questions 1 – 5 in Appendix G, the non-cognitive student factors that emerge include motivation, self-conceptualisation, academic preparedness, procrastination, success, failure, choice and diversity. These basic perceptions were organised broadly into readiness for learning, work ethic, expectations, and professional aspirations. Figure 4.2 shows the thematic network for the basic and organising factors that contributed to the global theme, namely student factors.

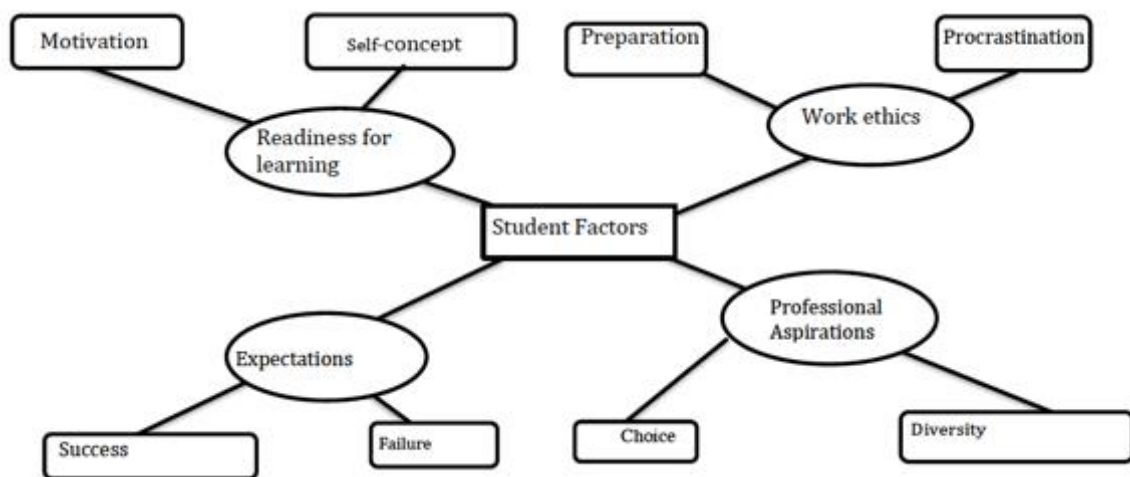


Figure 4.2. Thematic network for student factors that affect students' experiences

Affective and behavioural components such as readiness to learn, work ethic, expectations and aspirations influence how students approach their work. Table 3 (Appendix K) shows how self-motivation, self-motivation, preparation for learning, procrastination and the choices students make shape their experience in the TYP. What is particularly interesting is that the students had control over the variables and they could have been successful if these were managed properly.

Successful students indicated that they were ready to learn because they knew what they wanted. For example, Amisk was motivated by his ambition to become a nurse and the additional support of his family. He declared, "I am motivated for sure because upon completion I would get sponsored. I can achieve my dream of becoming a nurse and not have to leave the community and you know what I can get sponsorship while I am still here". His attitude was conducive to learning and he achieved all the course outcomes within the prescribed time of one school year. The motivation for completing the programme was that the Band would guarantee the financing of his university education.

The two students who did not make it, Wapask and Mikisew, attributed their failure to lack of guidance concerning career goals and diversity in course choice. Wapask shared, "I actually didn't have any career goal at the time. I actually didn't know what I wanted to go into or why I started it. My parents and community wanted me to ...". Mikisew spoke about lack of diversity when she said, "I want to do something in Aboriginal education but there is not much taught here not even Aboriginal history so I was bored cause I didn't like the other subjects".

Without variety in the course selections, the programme lost its appeal. Without a purpose they became disinterested, disengaged, and developed behaviours such as poor study habits and time management skills that ultimately led to the failure to achieve all the course outcomes. Fortunately, the lessons they learnt from their experiences reshaped their thinking and shaped their next steps.

From the perspectives of the teachers, Mr. Denard and Ms. Bronte, these students failed because of procrastination and poor work ethic. Ms. Bronte stated, "They failed to hand in their papers on time and their attitude to work in general was not up to standard". They entered the college with low skill sets and were not ready for the commitment that college work necessitates.

Mr. Denard added, “They are not committed. I don’t want to say, not blanket, because we have some very good students...”.

From my standpoint, the variations in the achievements of the students in the TYP seemed to be influenced by two factors – attitude and emotion. It appears that the successful students chose the attitude they perceived would reap success and were stimulated by the drive towards their goal. For some, the drive was the PSSSP scholarship and for others it was their professional ambition. Students who were stimulated by their emotions seemed to doubt either own capabilities and developed a poor work ethic and management skills. This caused stress that later resulted in disengagement, and eventually procrastination and failure. This is what is presented to the teachers who, in their responses, perceived the students as lacking interest, displaying a poor attitude, thus resulting in failure to achieving the course outcomes.

### **Academic Adjustment**

Academic adjustment is the psychological process of modifying and managing the demands of academic life (Clinciu, 2013). Responses obtained from Appendix F, questions 3 – 14, and Appendix G show that students in the TYP came to terms with new teaching styles, a programme that they felt was not culturally relevant, adjusting to difficult subjects such as mathematics and writing, and proper time management skills. Figure 4.3 shows the thematic network for academic adjustment as derived from the transcript responses.

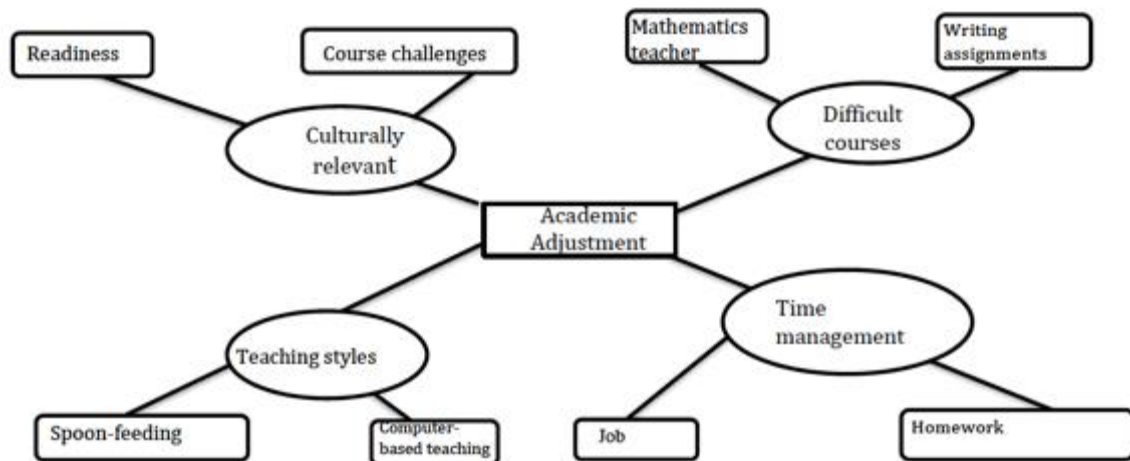


Figure 4.3. Thematic network for academic adjustment that affects students' experiences

While the successful students displayed a readiness to learn, others did not seem to be able to adjust academically. What the students perceived as the factors that affected their academic adjustment varied from the perspectives of the teachers. Table 4 (Appendix K) shows a sample of the students and teachers' views on academic adjustment. It is worth noting that the students are saying that they found adjusting to the new experience of the programme was challenging and would have taken a lot of effort on their part if they would like to succeed. In other words, it is a psychological choice that students engage in to modify their academic behavior (Clinciu, 2013).

At Askihk, while some students found the work manageable, others reported having to become more self-directed and learn to take responsibility for their learning. Some of the students' responses when they were asked how they adjusted academically pointed to the fact that the pace of learning and the workload was different from high school. Also, they soon realised that they were no longer going to be 'spoon-fed' by their teachers, so they had to be more self-reliant. Some of the students faced difficulties with specific teachers and courses, and some felt that there was a need for more indigenous perspectives in the curriculum. The students



that passed the course, detected from an early stage that the onus was on them to do well and that they had to figure out ways to be successful.

Mahekan accepted that they were adults and whatever decisions they made they had to stand by them. The experience in the TYP showed her that she had to manage her time properly. For Mahekan, the level of difficulty was manageable, however the workload was far more than what she was used to in high school. She stated, "...there was all these deadlines and you had to follow it through. It showed how university is and how you had to do all the studying by yourself. As adults it is basically what university is". Her challenge was to try not to procrastinate.

Although Amisk attributed his success to the 'easiness' of the course, his failure to adjust to the rigours of college in the beginning almost made him fail early. He said, "At first, I thought that the courses were easy and it was just like high school basically. I started to procrastinate, the work piled up and I almost failed the first semester". Since the available options matched what he wanted to do at university, he felt as if he was doing a refresher course while it matched the basics he learned in high school. For a short time, his complacency clouded his judgment and how he approached his study, causing him to miss handing in a few assignments in the early stages of the programme. Fortunately, he managed to reflect on his behaviour and took his work more seriously.

Mikisew, who did not succeed in the first year found it difficult to adjust to the volume of work and repeated the programme because of the lessons from the first year. She stated, "So, I did not do too well. I think it would have been better if they like... if they got us together to see what our interests are like Aboriginal history and Cree for instance".

Maskwa did not consider the programme useful and offered a similar explanation as to why adjusting academically was so challenging. She gave up early in the programme because she thought that there were too many reading courses that she found uninteresting. She said, “It was hard to keep up with all the essays and stuff that they were throwing at us because I didn’t really understand most of it”.

Mr. Denard’s perception as to why some students failed to pass the course was that the students were not doing any homework. “They need more time for preparation – to do homework. They think learning time is only in the classroom. And you know university – all the learning is taking place outside of the classroom”. He said that those students thought that learning time was classroom only. He believed that if they were doing any independent learning, they would need to do at least three hours per course outside the classroom. On the other hand, Bronte perceived that the students did not adjust to some of the instruction methods that were used to teach the university courses. She declared,

“The computer base is one model which they charge us for which is least effective. For most of the course we have no access to the professor ... we are nine hours away. We are not going to visit them. They (the students) don’t even know what the prof. looks like”.

The example she cited was that the professors from the city university taught the so-called ‘Internet courses’ which were not well received by both the local staff and the students. It appeared that the computer-based courses were difficult for the students to follow because they experienced difficulty with communicating with the professors during and after the lessons. The responses here imply that the students were not adjusting to the college routine because of various reasons such as lack of interest in the classes, difficulties in meeting deadlines, and heavy workloads.

The responses of the teachers suggest that they perceived that the reasons why students were not adjusting could be a result of the ineffective method of using computers to deliver some of the courses from the university campus. It seemed as if the students did not find the lessons interactive and the delivery was not in keeping with the familiar way of having a live person to communicate with in the classroom. In addition, it appeared as if the teachers believed that students were not independent learners and they did not know how to take responsibility for their learning.

### **Institutional Factors**

Institutional factors include the processes, procedures and practices that exist within the institution that are linked to the students' performance (Saenz et al., 1999). Responses from the participants to questions 2- 12 in Appendices F and G revealed that the programme design, facilities, and standards impacted on students' experiences in the TYP at Askihk. The students encountered difficulties with regards to library facilities as there was hardly any support provided due to lack of resources. There were also challenges faced by the students with other institutional factors such as social support, course content and structure, online learning and learning support, all of which affected the student performance. Figure 4.4 summarises the institutional factors that influenced learning in the TYP.



Figure 4.4. Thematic network for institutional that affect students' experiences

All the students were aware of the limitations of the institution, however those who benefitted from the programme worked with the resources that were available. They appreciated the effort that the teachers made to ensure that they were given all the assistance that they needed to be successful in the course. Table 5 (Appendix K) highlights some of the responses that the students gave to show how the institution shaped their experiences. The voices in this table reflect that the teachers and the institution have a major impact on how well they perform in the TYP (Fisher, 2002; Saenz et al., 1999).

Those students who did not find the course useful said that they had difficulty locating materials in the library for their research assignments, and among other things, they found the courses uninteresting and the teaching styles not engaging. In addition, the scarcity in materials further contributed to less and less engagement with the course until it was no longer appealing.

The students infer that the presence of the teacher in the teaching-learning situation is very important in their learning experience because they were often the only resources available to them. For instance, Wapask implied that the disconnect between teacher and student increased his frustration level and this probably led to him to lose interest in the programme. He said, "I

guess I wanted more one on one with the teachers and a proper library with materials". His way of knowing appeared to be to try to cram the content as a means to an end without any real understanding.

The teachers seemed to be well respected and highly regarded, especially by those that showed interest in their students' culture and traditions. About the teachers Atihk said, "Yeah, the teachers are good. I liked the teachers and they helped me...". Nevertheless, some students appeared to be shocked that the teachers did not purposefully engage with them using strategies such as direct experiences or illustrations from Indigenous culture in order for them to gain the knowledge and the skills necessary to achieve the course outcomes. Mahekan had this to say, "So, it was an eye-opener as to what postsecondary work is...the teacher just lectured and couldn't answer my questions. I had to find ways such as YouTube or my high school teacher ..." Meanwhile, Mikisew stated, "In comparing the TYP with the city university, umm...I like that they had Cree – a Cree course there, and Native studies ... There was no variety here to choose from". It is arguable that including indigenous perspectives in the curriculum might have encouraged more enjoyment in the learning, thereby increasing the likelihood of passing the courses.

Mr. Denard pointed out, "Another problem – library. Like, where are the stacks? Where can you see books? There are no books". Ms. Bronte noted, "Say, if someone is dyslexic for example, at the university they would get the supports. But we don't have this specialization at Askihk". The teachers and students agreed that limited resources in the institution, restricted the opportunity for experiential learning while the instructional strategies attributed to the poor performance and low-motivation of some of the students. Some students indicated that they would have preferred to have some more Indigenous perspectives included in the programme.

When teachers were asked what they believed contributed to the students' success or failure in the TYP, their responses insinuated that the college did not do enough to provide the students with the resources that could have contributed to their success in the TYP. Both students and teachers considered that the human resources, for example the instructors, and the physical resources, such as technology, did not meet the needs of the students.

### **Sectoral Factors**

Sectoral factors are global trends caused by competition and collaboration that influence the policy and management of an institution (Altbach et al., 2009). I include sectoral factors as a theme because the community leaders envisioned that in order to provide quality education for the on-reserve students to compete with the rest of society successfully, there must be collaboration with the wider education sector. Responses to questions 12 and 13 in Appendix F and questions 11 and 12 in Appendix G showed that by adopting a customer-focussed approach to managing students' demands (Sirvanci, 1996); the Band councillors or leadership hoped for more FNMI students from Kiwetin to go to university. With the local leaders taking ownership of the TYP, they had the freedom to develop their marketing strategy, programme design and curriculum unique to the needs of the FNMI students in the community. Figure 4.5 shows how responses about the teachers, courses, sponsorship, TYP, policies and standards are organised to facilitate a better understanding of how sectoral factors influence students' experiences.

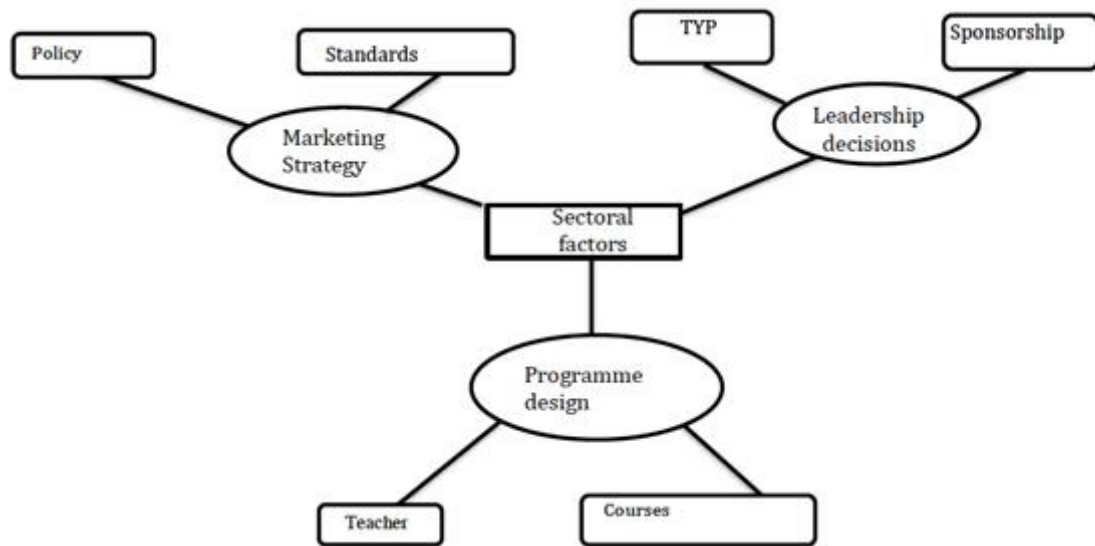


Figure 4.5. Thematic network for sectoral factors that affect students' experiences

In an interview with a college administrator, I was told that the Band councillors offered each student financial tuition support if they enrolled into the programme. Whenever they complete the programme, they are entitled to PSSSP to attend university (Personal interview, September 26, 2012). Table 6 (Appendix K) shows examples of how the students and teachers respond to the decision to offer the TYP on the reserve. The interesting thing to note about this section is that the students and teachers thought it was a positive idea that the community was offering the TYP.

“The fact that the programme is in our community makes it better for us. We are near our family and we receive a stipend every month”, said Atihk. All the students shared views similar to Atihk’s, who praised the decision the Band councillors made by affording them the opportunity to study in their community where they were close to their family members. With the stipend that they received, they were spared some financial burdens and they did not have accommodation and transportation to worry about. Thereby, it is more likely that they would be successful in the programme and eligible for PSSSP scholarships to attend university. As it

relates to economic factors, the students regarded the decision in a positive light since the potential to access a university education became more conceivable. The teachers also believed that it was a wise marketing strategy to locate the TYP in the community so that retention would improve and more students would be likely to access university. Mr. Denard stated, "Before the TYP at [...], the dropout rate was 95%. For that, it was phenomenal having the college on the reserve". Ms. Bronte perceived that having the TYP on the reserve could decrease the attrition rate of dropouts from university, with the added convenience of small classes that would benefit any learner. She said, "...they get one-on-one contact with us, because our class sizes are smaller. In the city there are hundreds of students in a class ...".

The various responses of both the students and teachers indicate that locating Askihk College on the reserve was viewed as a positive strategy on the part of the Band Council which was their way of focussing on their customers (Sirvanci, 1996). The students appreciated that they were near their families and friends and the teachers believed that having the students stay on the reserve was good because they were not discriminated against as they might be in the city.

If we look at the themes more deeply, we see where there are potential overlaps in terms of organising the basic themes. For example, work ethic can be a student factor as well as an academic adjustment since it relates to the student and it is a behaviour that is also reflected in academic standards. While exploring the voices of the students, using thematic analysis as a tool for summarising and interpreting patterns might assist readers in understanding the teaching-learning experiences of the FNMI students. There was consistency in the students' voices and what they were saying about each theme. Table 7 shows that a large majority of students felt the same way about the themes that emerged.



Table 7. Summary of the students' voices

Emerging theme	What the students say
<b>External factors</b>	All the students said that the moral support and encouragement of their family, friends, teachers and the community in general were instrumental in helping them to make the decision to enrol in the TYP. Interpersonal relationships in the form of social, cultural, and other influences was of great significance or value to the students and almost all of them felt that attending the TYP is an obligation to the family's show of support.
<b>Student factors</b>	For all the students, factors such as self-expectations, readiness to work, professional aspirations and work ethics were important contributors to their success or failure to achieve the outcomes of the TYP.
<b>Academic adjustment</b>	The transition into postsecondary was challenging for the students and a large majority of them had difficulty adjusting academically. Among the challenges was they had to adjust how they studied and how they managed their time while learning to conform to different teaching styles.
<b>Institutional factors</b>	All the students said that they were satisfied that their community had their own postsecondary institution where they could pursue the TYP. At the same time, they also acknowledged that if the institution had more resources and diversity in the curriculum, then their learning environment could have been more engaging.
<b>Sectoral factors</b>	All the students appreciated that their leaders had the foresight to establish the TYP in the community out of concern for the welfare of high school graduates who desire to have a postsecondary education. This meant that they did not have to leave the safety and support of their family, friends and safety of the reserve at a very young age to attend the ones in the city.

## **CHAPTER 5. ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I present the findings using a phenomenographic approach as a lens to explore the variations of conceptions of learning of the students themselves, as well as those of their teachers. As was mentioned in the methodology, Chapter 3, an outcome space is used to illustrate and communicate the variations in the ways the students understand their experiences in the TYP. It contains hierarchically-structured categories based on the students' interpretation of the teaching-learning environment. In reporting the findings, it is inevitable that my voice will also be heard.

### **The Outcome Space of the Findings**

My role in this section is to distinguish fundamental differences in how on-reserve students make sense of the TYP as I explore different aspects of their reflections on their relationship with the experiences. Readers should remember that as a researcher, I am not asking 'Why is this so?', but rather I am exploring 'In what respect do these ways of understanding differ?' Since the focus of my research is on examining how students conceive of the TYP through a phenomenographic analysis of their discursive accounts, an outcome space is used to illustrate and communicate the characteristics of conceptions of experiencing in the TYP (Yates, Patridge, & Bruce, 2012).

### **Categories of Description and Conceptions of Learning**

The categories of description classify the on-reserve FNMI learners' conceptions of their TYP experiences in two qualitatively different ways, namely a surface approach and a deep approach to learning. This study highlights that in respect to these FNMI students, deep and

surface learning was found to be an adoption to fit the environment rather than characteristics. The findings classify some FNMI as surface learners because of the approaches they adopted given their environment. In agreement with the phenomenographic research methodology, two conceptual categories were identified from the findings of this study, namely Category A and Category B. These categories are used to classify on-reserve FNMI learners' conceptions of their TYP experiences into surface and deep approaches respectively.

Category A, the surface approach to learning, contains the first three learning conceptions, namely, fulfilling obligations and expectations, completing discrete tasks that are unrelated to each other, and applying resources to acquire the knowledge for passing the course. Learning is primarily derived from a socially-oriented achievement perspective and focused on task completion and achieving the general knowledge and skills of the TYP.

Category B, the deep approach, contains the next three approaches to learning, including understanding the usefulness of the programme and deriving enjoyment from it, changing and seeing something in a different way by searching for the meaning inherent in pursuing the course on the reserve, and experiencing self-actualisation and personal fulfilment. In this category, learning is seen as seeking meaning primarily, where students concentrate on developing the values and attitude needed for university and after.

Table 8 summarises how these on-reserve students conceived of their learning experiences in the TYP. The different ways the FNMI experience the TYP phenomenon, Categories A and B, are further sorted into six qualitatively different conceptions of learning.

Table 8. Students' Conception of Learning in the on-reserve TYP

Students see learning in the TYP as ...	
Conceptions	Categories of description
a sense of obligation and expectation	A Surface Learning Approach (Reproducing)
increasing one's knowledge by completing discrete tasks	
applying resources to acquire the knowledge necessary for achieving the course outcomes	
understanding the usefulness of the programme and deriving enjoyment from it	B Deep Approach (Abstract/transforming)
changing and seeing something in a different way	
Self-actualisation and personal fulfilment	

Adapted from the six conceptions of learning in Marton, Beaty, and Dall'Alba (1993).

### Category A: Surface Learning Approach

There are many factors that encourage students to adopt a surface approach to learning however, with the FNMI learners, factors such as fear from letting down their parents and teachers, and anxiety over the lack of resources resulted in disengagement for some students so they adopted a surface approach to their learning. Other students' factors include an intention to only achieve minimal pass marks; allowing non-academic priorities to take precedence; lack of time to study due to high workload; the relevance of the learning task; the attitude and enthusiasm; high anxiety about passing and genuine inability. The factors from the teachers' side that predispose some students towards a surface approach to learning include teaching piecemeal content, rather than teaching the underlying structure of ideas and subjects; the attitude and enthusiasm of the instructor; the expected form of assessment; teaching in a way that is cynical

about the subject or the 'limited' capacity of students to do well; providing insufficient time by overloading students; and creating undue anxiety in students about their prospects.

In the exploration of the FNMI experiences in the TYP, it was found that some students enrolled in the TYP because they felt they were obligated to fulfil the expectations of extrinsic motivators such as their families, teachers, Elders, and even close friends. They believe that learning is just a means to an end. Others were reproducing or simply completing course outcomes which they considered to be discrete tasks that at times seemed unrelated to each other, but necessary for university. Still, a few students understood their learning as a process of applying any resources available to acquire the knowledge necessary for academic success in the transition programme. In the next paragraphs, evidence of these claims is elaborated on and discussed in more detail.

### **Conception 1: Students see learning as fulfilling obligations and expectations**

The first conception focuses on students who see their learning in the TYP as fulfilling an obligation. All the students, except for Amisk, said that they were extrinsically motivated out of obligation to their family or significant others such as elders and teachers. Maskwa, who is the first child of her parents to graduate from high school, remarked, "Although I had an interest in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) I enrolled in the TYP instead of opposing my parents". The family forms the centrepiece of an individual's life in Indigenous culture and children often feel obligated to respect their parents' wishes. Maskwa felt obligated to her parents and family members who wanted her to be the first one in the family to attend university. However, a few weeks into the TYP, she was the first student to discover that she did not want to go to university and became the only student to drop out of the programme within a year. To explain why she enrolled in the TYP, Maskwa said, "I had no choice ... I did not have any! I was

just going, going... If I had finished it, then I guess it would have been a good programme. So, preparing me that way is probably a good idea ...” What Maskwa was eventually saying was that she feared letting let down her parents who had faith in her abilities as a student.

Social motivation, which includes loyalty to friends, also influenced some of the students to enrol in the TYP. For Wapask and Mikisew, who did not have a clear career plan, social motivation and friendship was used in the guise of academic goals (Pintrich, 2003) as the reason to enrol in the programme. Wapask stated, “I wanted to be where my close friends were, and being part of a successful group of high school graduates whom the community expected to go to university, it was only natural that I too want to enrol in the TYP”. He continued, “I felt committed to showing my mom that I was capable of securing PSSSP sponsorship. I was told [by the teachers] it was mandatory to obtain sponsorship to go forward with my postsecondary education”. At the time of the study, he already spent two years in the programme and was still short of a few courses to move on to university.

Mikisew’s experience was similar to Wapask. She said, “I was not too sure why I enrolled in the programme except for the fact that Amisk, Wapask and Maskwa are my close friends”. She was encouraged by her high school principal and teachers to enrol in the programme, although she was unsure what she wanted to do in university. She was, however, certain that she wanted to be with the friends she had since kindergarten. She stated, “Before I graduated (high school), no after we graduated, they told us that we to attend... I am not too sure who ...The teachers at the high school, the principal and I think some of the college staff came to tell us about it, and I wanted to stay with my friends...” For Mikisew, the TYP experience was another opportunity for her to stick around with her friends, an approach that is based on

extrinsic motivation, fuelled by a desire to gain social approval (Biggs, 1991; Tao & Hong, 2014).

The teacher Bob Denard perceived that “the TYP in the community encourages students who would like to access postsecondary and be near friends and family while they study”. He believed that the students felt “obligated to their elders and community leaders who were responsible for providing an opportunity and financial access to postsecondary through the TYP and that is a good thing”. He also said that the decision that the Band Counsellors made to offer the TYP in Kiwetin was a wise economic strategy. He asserted, “Nearly all the high school graduates felt that if they did not attend, they would not qualify for a PSSSP scholarship for university”. Furthermore, “When they agreed to sponsor successful TYP students for PSSSP, future students are encouraged to register here rather than venture to an on-campus TYP in the city”. In his estimation, he would be happy if the knowledge and skills gained in the programme was put to good use and he was grateful to those who made it through the programme.

Ann Bronte's perspective was that students adopted a surface approach to their learning and thought that the only reason why they enrolled in the TYP was that “It is there so they might as well do it. Some of the students did not really want to be there, but there was nothing else to do”. The students attended the TYP because it was located in the community. She believed that since the TYP was readily available, most high school graduates did not show any commitment to it. She believed that the students attended the TYP because the Band Council subsidised the tuition and they felt “obligated to their leaders for providing the programme in Kiwetin”. She added, “They treat it like a joke sometimes, especially since it's free. The Band paid the students' tuition at Askihk College you know. They feel it was enough to ‘glide’ through the courses without much effort”.

Although the surface approach has extrinsic motivation as its basis (Biggs, 1991), and although some researchers believe that it yields poor outcomes (Platow, Mavor, & Grace, 2013; Webb, 1997), the findings of this study show that this is not always the case. If family obligation is seen in the psychological sense that one should help, respect and contribute to the family (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999), then in the FNMI culture students' decision to continue their education out of a sense of obligation problematizes the negative connotations that critics have of surface approaches to learning. This study also shows that for some students, what could have its origin in respect and a sense of obligation could have roots into a deep approach to learning for highly motivated students. Some students adopted the surface approach because of fear of failing their parents, while others view the encouragement from parents, teachers and Elders as motivation, and thereby approached learning differently.

Compared to individualist cultures, people in collectivist cultures – such as the Indigenous people – are aware of the duties expected of them and want to behave as accepted (Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002). Since collective cultures emphasise positive group interrelationships, students with a greater sense of obligation to their family or someone whom they respect seem to obtain desire from being dutiful. Studies have found that obligation is also associated with motivation, self-efficacy, sense of competence, educational aspirations and has beneficial effects on well-being (Fuligni, 2001; Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Fuligni & Zhang, 2004; Gonzales et al., 2008; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). This is because through social motivation (what other people value), a phenomenon may take on intrinsic importance or a new value if other people important to the person value the same thing (Bigg & Tang, 2011).

Atihk was one of two students who completed the programme within the expected timeframe of a year. He was motivated by his mother and the Elders to enrol in the TYP. Atihk



stated, “Oh, I enrolled into TYP there because [the Band Council] said that we get sponsored to go to [the city university] a year after... it’s far better to do it here, experience here, where you’re around people you know, and who expect you to pass...”. Atihk’s reason for applying to the transition programme was out of obligation to his family and teachers who encouraged him to go because of his good high school grades. Although he wanted to be a teacher, the desire to please the people whom he held in high esteem was his motivation: “My mom wanted me to go to college and I enrolled in the programme to please her ...also, I wanted to do it as well to make it easier on her”.

Mahekan, on the other hand, was not given a choice regarding attending the TYP: “I knew I wanted to be a doctor but my father’s insistence was significant to my attending”. As the only female participant who completed the TYP, she enrolled because her father expected her to do so. She continued, “My dad, he said, ‘That’s what it is’, and I had to go through that TYP and be like my mother who has her masters ... besides, I want to become a doctor, and I guess this is a good place to start”. Although she did not complete the programme in the first year because of a previously mentioned health issue that prevented her from going beyond her fourth month in the college, at the time of her interview she was completing the programme a second time around.

Mahekan’s story is one that supports how a strong sense of duty or obligation is not linked to a surface approach to learning but to positive outcomes. It not only shows how the traditional notion of group and family loyalty could make students’ conception of fulfilling expectations a valid reason to register in the college TYP. It makes us consider that what is held to be a surface approach to learning (because of where the motivation originates), could take on a new value for FNMI learners. From a cultural perspective results show that they were stimulated

to enrol in the TYP out of obligation to their teachers, parents, community leaders or Elders, and do not necessarily reflect a surface approach to learning.

### **Conception 2: Students see learning as increasing completing discrete tasks**

Some students interpret the learning experience in the TYP as just acquiring sufficient knowledge to transition to university. In this conception, the knowledge or skills gained are seen as important because they can be put to some use. Students who perceive knowledge as discrete, unrelated tasks that bear little or no relationship to each other also see learning as a means to an end. Their conception of the TYP is to reproduce enough information to qualify them to pass the course so these students preferred teachers to provide pre-digested information ready for learning, an approach Entwistle (1991) refers to as a surface learning.

The argument for Conception 2 was made based on the students' responses about what they perceive knowledge for university would look like. Amisk said, "I thought that to prepare for university meant that I would complete a lot of assignments and course work that the teachers will assess and automatically give good grades". He felt it was easier to rote learn the material rather than think (Biggs, 1991). He expanded on this by adding, "I was adept at memorising and reproducing selected details correctly". He believed that the teachers were the authority on all the knowledge provided: "I think the teachers tried their best to teach us everything we need to learn ... so if we were attentive in school, we would have learnt it from them. Since I want financial assistance for university I took in everything I needed to complete the TYP".

For Amisk, this approach appeared to work well and the outcome was commendable. He was academically successful and completed the course within a year. What Amisk said was that much of his success in the TYP simply involved being attentive on his part and following his teachers' instructions. He recounted how his performance was based on using a variety of

cognitive processes to recall and reproduce almost everything he was taught, even if he did not quite understand the content: "I asked the teacher a lot of questions, and being the diligent and attentive student that I am, I following all the advice and instructions of the teachers". That was advantageous for him and he believed that what makes a successful student was how well one could recall and reproduce what the teachers taught. What is important is not that Amisk conceives learning as the memorisation of knowledge; instead, it is the motivation behind the memorizing behaviour that is significant. To him, success at the end of the transition programme brings the hope of financial assistance for a university education, a means-to-an-end, another surface approach (Biggs, 1991). If he was successful in the TYP, then he would be eligible for the PSSSP (AFN, 2012)

There were other students who also believed that the TYP involved recalling and reproducing the knowledge shared with them so that they could pass the courses and transition to university. They felt that they were not so successful because they lacked other qualities such as academic preparedness and proper study habits. They were short-sighted because they did not envision that the volume of work, the level of difficulty or interest and motivation, would play significant roles in how well they could recall and reproduce.

Mikisew, for example, said, "I was not able to satisfy the outcomes of the curriculum because I could not recall the facts and information taught in some of the courses". In what she described as a wasted first year, Mikisew claimed, "I had a hard time understanding the work...". About the courses, she said, "I felt like they didn't have the classes I needed in order to have an interest in them. They chose our specific classes for us, and we were not able to pick our own. They didn't have classes I was interested in..."

Learning is a quest for meaning, linking and relating ideas that lead to understanding and driven by the desire for knowledge (Ridley, 2007) and it can be problematic if it is perceived as important just because it can be put to some use, either now or at some future time. It is possible that Mikisew was not motivated because she felt that the content did not have much meaning to her. She expressed a liking and aptitude for only some courses and she did not link how those offered in the TYP were helping her to choose a career in those areas. She said, "I like Cree, Native Studies and Aboriginal History but I they only offered a little Aboriginal History and I find Canadian history boring... I want to do Aboriginal education". It appeared that her performance could have been more productive if the college curriculum offered other choices that made sense and seem connected to her. Mikisew repeated another year in the programme but her academic performance did not improve as she continued to focus on learning as a means to an end.

Similar to Mikisew, Waspask was unable to recall and reproduce the knowledge taught to achieve the course outcomes. He also repeated another year, and his experience was that "There were just too many assignments and I kept missing the deadlines". His reason for failing academically was that "The volume of work was too much and with very limited background knowledge I took a long time to get on task with my assignments". He continued, "I had a hard time understanding the work and could not remember so many things from class". Wapask admitted, "I was not surprised that I did not pass the first year because it was too much work for me and I was not expecting to remember many facts". He could have perceived learning in the transition curriculum as restricted to acquiring lengthy and unrelated materials, therefore he adopted a reproducing approach (Purdie & Hattie, 2002): "I know that the learning is needed for

university but I didn't understand a lot of the work ... I tried". This could also be a sense of fear of failure (Kiminiski, 2012).

For Maskwa, who dropped out very early from the TYP programme, it was difficult to continue because, "I felt that I had too many things to learn and I was not longer motivated by the prospects of going to a university at that time". Maskwa said her reason for dropping out of college within the first four weeks was that "I don't feel as smart as I should have been and I was not taught as well as we could have been. It was hard to keep up with all the essays and stuff that they were throwing at us because I didn't really understand most of it". She continued, "I did not see how the TYP was helping me to get to the RCMP anyway". Maskwa's focus was on how much knowledge she could not recall or reproduce. Probably because of how the curriculum was presented to her, she felt that the content was difficult and there was no connection between the courses. She recalled, "The teacher only lectures and I quickly lost interest". She also said, "I was not 'seeing' the significance of having so many writing courses and I could not understand the mathematics lecturer either". The result was that sometimes she went to school late or not at all.

Since Maskwa was not able to see the relatedness between the courses, this could be the reason why she had a difficult time retaining the knowledge. The surface approach to learning may be characterised by an uphill struggle, marked by boredom and feelings of depression (Haggai, 2003). For Maskwa, this perception developed into a feeling of being incompetent and she doubted in her capabilities as a prospective university student: "I thought that the TYP could help me to gain more knowledge so that it would be easier to get into the RCMP but it did not". It appeared as if the more complex and lengthier the curriculum became, the more she was less eager to work or study. It was possible that she experienced a significant level of frustration

sufficient to drop out of the TYP. In the final analysis, she gave up the course for an entirely different programme that emphasised specialised skills training rather than academic cognition.

The teachers had other perceptions of why the students saw their learning as merely increasing knowledge and they just wanted to complete some discrete courses that seemed unrelated to each other. Their perspectives were different from those of the students and also differed from each other. Bob Denard said that some of the students did not perceive their learning in the TYP as a combination of hard work and performance. That could account for why they produced assignments 'any-and-any' how with the expectation to get a good grade. "These students were a product of the mistakes administration made earlier in their schooling". According to Denard, "Askihk College is always trying to fight social passing because it encourages passive learning and some students believe that even at the college level the teacher would pass them regardless of the quality of work ...". His story was that from their earlier years training in the lower schools the education system practised the idea of social passing of students. Social passing or social promotion are terms used to describe the practice of moving students from one grade to the next with their peers even if they have not satisfied grade's academic requirements (Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment, 2013). This process was not uncommon on First Nations reservations, the claim being that it is pursued in the interest of a student's social and psychological wellbeing. The students who were part of that system perceived that this practice was perpetuated at the college level as well to avoid failing students. Denard alluded to the fact that these practices in the earlier school system may have communicated to students that they could still be rewarded whether or not they studied. Some students believed that whatever they presented as their best work should be accepted because it indicated that at least they did some work.

**Conception 3: Students see learning as applying resources**

It is evident from the quotations below that students and teachers believe that resources can be powerful enough to affect a broad range of outcomes. They see learning as being able to access or draw on resources to achieve their outcomes and perform only if the resource is available to them. The resources identified by the students were their teachers, finances, library materials, computers, and internal reading materials.

Mikisew, who did not pass the course after being in the programme for two years, felt that the teachers were not engaging: "Instead of bringing the content all at once, I wanted the teachers to break it down for her to understand". She added, "I think it's the teacher how they teach the kids, the students cause lots of teachers teach in different ways. Some teachers you know, don't really interest students..."

Financial resources or their absence played an important role in how the students who repeated the programme experienced it. After not passing the TYP the first year, two students tried again because they believed that repeating the work would help them to achieve the objectives and pass the course, meaning that the Band Council no longer financed their tuition for the TYP. The decision to work part time to acquire the financial resources to complete the programme was an effort to become financially stable. They believed that working affected their schoolwork because their employers also expected them to work during school hours. With a shortage of resources, these two students admitted that they could not perform well in the TYP. Wapask, claimed, "I was working at a gas station which give me some unusual hours so I didn't get time to study". Mikisew said, "I think if I wasn't working I think I would have done better. You know. Kind of stressed me out. Going to work and to school. Sometimes I have to go to work in the morning, and I go back at night. It was stressful". Indeed, the whole purpose of

repeating another year in the TYP was for Mikisew and Wapask to improve in their academic performance. However, they also perceived that the lack of resources, such as tutoring, was the reason why they failed. They even compared what they heard was available in the city university with what was provided at Askihk Community College.

According to Mikisew, "They have tutoring. They have libraries. They have centres over there for studying. Yeah". She continued, "If I had access to more resources such as tutors and learning centres I could have completed the programme because I would pass the courses". Wapask felt that he lacked support in the most basic resource of a college – a functioning library. In response to the question about what he believed contributed to his failure to complete the programme, his reply was,

For the research papers, we were expected to use the online library, which was kind of difficult for us. Like I couldn't find the researches that I wanted. I would have liked to be at the actual library at the University. There was hardly anyone to consult whenever there was difficulty in obtaining materials in the online library and students often resort to asking their peers or the teacher if he is available.

For students like Mikisew and Wapask, learning is about using resources to engage them in teaching and learning. Without these resources, learning the content of the TYP was challenging and resulted in them not achieving certain academic outcomes. Not all students, however, were affected by the lack of school materials. Askihk, who was one of the successful students, remarked, "The function of the library is a quiet place to sit and do assignments, it was not a resource centre for research assignments".

Human resources were paramount for other students. Maskwa dropped out and did not want to continue the TYP because she wanted the teachers to be more engaging in how they



taught: "I remembered that in high school the teachers spoon-fed us and went slower in their teaching". She also believed that the college teachers could have been more communicative and provided her more individual attention. She added, "I guess I wanted more one on one with the teachers... I did not get the individual attention that I thought she deserved, so I lost interest and dropped out of the programme".

The teachers' views on the conception of learning as applying resources were quite different from those of the students, but they too perceived that most students depended to a great extent on the resources. One teacher identified extra-curricular activities, professional development, technology and supportive staff as the resources that the students needed to help them develop their social and interpersonal skills. The other teacher believed that the students lack resources that would assist those who struggle with the work due to learning challenges such as dyslexia.

Bob Denard thought, "Some of the students needed the essential social support that would make the TYP campus life in Kiwetin more meaningful". His view was that the administration did not foster a collegiate experience for the students in a remote geographical location. He declared, "The students were not all happy about their lack of collegiate experience, which included social activities for the students outside the academic college curriculum". The example he used was that the college students had to interact with the high school students for their extracurricular and social activities. He explained, "There is also the social aspect. They don't have an Aboriginal club. There is no queer 'liming' club. There is no community. There's no basketball club. There is just nothing to do. I don't think they even getting an undergrad card. They don't even have their students' card. There are no Aboriginal clubs".

Anne Bronte was concerned that the students needed resources such as learning assistant centres for those with learning disabilities, but there were none. She said, "If a student is dyslexic for example, at the university they would get the supports. But we don't have this specialisation at Askihk". In one of her statements, she remarked, "Another problem is the library. How could you write a paper if you don't have access to books? The only resources we have are the online journals and stuff. It is very isolating". As the English and Language Arts instructor, Bronte was also concerned that the students depended heavily on the library, but it was inefficient in supplying the resources that the students needed for their assignments. This situation was similar to what Mikisew and Wapask underlined, namely about it not having the collection of library books needed for research purposes.

In addition, Bronte also believed that the computer-based model of delivery of the University 1 course was the least effective method of delivery in the TYP because the Internet access to the city-based professors was of very poor quality. She continued, "the students depended on that resource, but when they had any questions, there was no one available online from the university to answer them. Students were expected to submit their work internally through the university, but there were always glitches, and it was never working".

Both teachers had concerns that the professional development available to them as instructors was inadequate. They could be better resources for the students if they collaborate with the high school teachers to create resources that will address future students' readiness for the transition programme. In the interview, both teachers expressed their disappointment that both the high school and the college were unable to work together to provide this support and much-needed resource.

Both students and teachers believed if they had access to requisite resources – such as more library materials, teachers, and funds – they would be able to utilise and apply them so that learning could improve and possibly increase student achievements. For these students, it is evident that learning revolves around resources while the latter's inadequacy impacted on instruction and their achievement due to a subsequent lack of active engagement in the learning process. Without the direct experiences that resources can provide, students perceived that they could not make meaning of their learning; therefore, they adopted a surface approach in response to the environment. According to Anne Bronte,

Students did not see how their courses were related, so there were no commitments shown in their work... They attended classes but did no follow-up work with independent studying, reading or researching outside of the classroom... Not doing independent work led to their inability to think critically and express themselves... so out of a fear of failure they did not complete their assignments nor hand in their work.

On the other hand, and in relation to the approach to learning, Bob Denard explained,

The students were not aware that learning is a combination of related processes that require learners' motivation, cognitive engagement and building on prior knowledge... the students did not understand that the purpose doing their assignments was not only to get a grade but also to develop their other learning skills... Since the students did to perceive that there was a relationship between the different learning processes such as reading, writing and researching, they tried to memorise what they could recall from the class... As a result, many of them failed most of the courses and either dropped out or repeated them year after year.

**Category B: Deep Learning Approach**

The first three conceptions focused on the surface approach to learning. Conceptions 4, 5 and 6 relate to learning experiences that characteristically concentrate on the role of meaning in learning. Students who are sufficiently engaged with learning the course material and perceive the value of the course as high will have an overall positive learning experience (Floyd et al., 2009). When students adopt deep approaches to learning it is because they recognise the dynamic and interrelated structure of the content of what they are learning. Learning becomes a journey of exploration, discovery and growth rather than just a process. In deep learning students understand reality, therefore, their outlook on the topics learned are likely to change. Individual students show self-involvement and motivation through interest, understanding and commitment (Marton et al., 1993; Kember et al., 2004; Ramsden, 2003). Students who display a deep approach to learning seek meaning, relate ideas, use evidence and integrate ideas. They also display a readiness to learn, have a sense of purpose and confidence in their occupational aspirations and seem to possess clearly defined goals and systems that enabled FNMI students to perform well academically in the transition programme.

**Conception 4: Students see learning as understanding and enjoyment**

Students who exemplify Conception 4 perceive learning as understanding and gratification. They realise that their role is to focus on the real reason why they have enrolled in the programme and they accept that there must be a reciprocal relationship between the student and institution for there to be success. Students who embraced this conception of learning understand and enjoy the experience. Certain of the FNMI students recognise that the purpose of the programme was for them to develop more awareness of what the TYP represents in their journey to university. Unlike Conception 3 where students depended on resources to achieve the learning outcomes, in

Conception 4, students see learning as more than just using resources to become knowledgeable. These students perceive learning as a process in which knowledge is collectively and collaboratively built through the relationship and interactions between teachers, students, materials, and their environment (Kurdziolek, 2011).

Atihk found the experience in college very exciting. He said, "I felt prepared for the experience, and throughout the year I maintained excellent grades, especially in the subject that I regarded as being relevant to my career choice – mathematics". As the first successful participant in the TYP, Atihk attributed his success to the fact that, "I was able to draw on the dedication of his teachers. My approach was to organise time outside of class hours to meet with the teachers and ask for additional tutoring if I did not understand something in classroom". He emphasised, "Yeah, the teachers are good. I liked the teachers. They helped me to complete all my work on time and giving me advice as to what to do at all times and stuff like that". He added, "When I wanted a deeper understanding of the topics I go to the teacher". Atihk was able to move from an initial understanding to a deeper understanding of the work because he sought out the help of his teachers. That action indicated that he did not just view his courses as an accumulation of knowledge; rather he sought a deeper understanding of the topics by drawing on the teachers as his resource.

Amisk was the other student to complete the outcomes of the programme within a year. In his interview he pointed out that "Although I was motivated to attend the community college, it was my parents and teachers who influenced me to act". He was the only student who expressed a desire to register in the TYP, not just because he wanted to gratify his parents, but also because he was inspired to attend university. He said, "I owed it to myself to take the opportunity that the TYP offered in Kiwetin. I always had the ambition of becoming a nurse and

with my achievement goal in mind; the transition programme presented an opportunity for me to pursue that career... I wanted to do nursing, and that is the way to get into university". The only way he figured that he would qualify academically for university was through the transition programme. His motivation was fuelled by a desire to move off the reserve and return in the future to help build his community. At the time of the interview he was not only successful in the TYP programme, he had also completed one year of his undergraduate studies leading to his nursing degree. He admitted,

In the beginning, I was a bit over-confident. I almost failed some courses because I kept procrastinating believing that the work was not challenging enough. I misled myself into thinking that I could complete his assignments within a short time. I think the content should be higher than high school but it was like repeating stuff from high school.

Eventually he realised that the work might not constitute much new knowledge but the volume was far more than what he processed in high school. That appeared deceptive, and if he were not careful, there would be no urgency to complete the assignments, thus leading to failure. Amisk ended, "One thing I appreciate about the TYP was the proper use of time".

It was not only the students who achieved successful academic outcomes in the TYP course who experienced Conception 4. Mikisew would be regarded as not being successful in the TYP because she did not achieve the academic outcomes of the course, even after repeating it twice. In response to the question about she learnt most from the TYP experience, Mikisew said,

How to manage my time more. Like I said, I learned how to write university papers... The TYP was preparing us for university, but we would go through

learning techniques. The college helped us to understand how learning is and the TYP helped me to become a better candidate for university.

She would have developed a deeper conception of learning because she was able to say that the second year taught her more valuable lessons than just how to pass a course. She underlined, “My experience of being in the programme benefitted me far more because I learnt to be more organised in my studies. Although I did not get much native stuff, I also learnt to appreciate the subjects that I did not like when I started out originally. They became clearer and more relevant but I would still want to learn more Aboriginal history”.

Although there were a few courses that she did not like because she did not find them relevant to her wish to be an educator, Mikisew acknowledged that it was important for her to understand them to pass the course: “I did not complete the programme in the first year or second year, but I developed some relevant skills and attitude that I feel would make me successful if I get to go to university in the city to once again repeat the TYP there”. The experience in Kiwetin made her realise that learning involved more than just academics or how to earn a passing grade but involved learning how to cope with working and studying.

There were variations in what the teachers perceived as learning, namely as understanding the usefulness of the programme and deriving enjoyment from it. One teacher perceived that students who adopted that approach to learning might not have passed the course; however, by the end of the year they had a more purposeful attitude than when they started and began to appreciate what they did not like when they started originally.

Anne Bronte's conception was that students who listened to the teachers eventually changed their attitude towards their learning and showed improvements when they began achieving success in some of the expectations. She observed that the experience at Askihk

helped some students to mature by the end of the year. It could be that the TYP experience helped them to discover whom they really were, regardless of whether or not they passed the programme. She singled out one student, Mahekan, who had shown great promise and it was unfortunate that she had to drop out because of her circumstances. Despite these unforeseen circumstances, she found that Mahekan was very persistent and although she was not successful during the first year, she eventually completed the TYP.

Bob Denard spoke about the advantages of small classes in helping students to love learning. He elaborated by saying that he enjoyed an intimate relationship with the students because of the small class sizes that allow students and teachers to have relationships that are more meaningful: "So in regards to attitude towards learning... it's improving. But there's still... a majority probably have a cavalier attitude to learning". He explained this to mean that although in general some are not always committed to the programme; there are a few who are outstanding students who meet the expectations of the university. These students go beyond the hours in class, and they come with questions as well as answers whenever they undertake their independent studies.

#### **Conception 5: Students see learning as changing and seeing something different in pursuing the programme on the reserve**

The students who achieved better grades academically are on the top of the conceptions of learning hierarchy because learning is seen as searching for the meaning inherent in pursuing the programme on the reserve (Alamdarloo et al., 2013). The responses show that the students who exhibit this conception of learning are demonstrating that learning is more than a process of transferring knowledge and exploring. It is discovery and growth and usually yields good performance and success. Purdie and Hattie (2002) have stated that students who can conceive of their learning high in the hierarchy have greater learning achievement. In addition, the students



who completed the programme could be regarded as those who are most successful because they achieved the learning outcomes prescribed by the course curriculum. They are also well-motivated, demonstrated proper study habits and academic preparedness while mastering the teachers' instructions.

Amisk always held the ambition of becoming a nurse and with his achievement goal in mind; the transition programme presented an opportunity for him to pursue his career: "I wanted to do nursing, and that is the way to get into university. The only way I figure that I would qualify academically for a university was through the transition programme". Furthermore, his motivation was fuelled by a desire to move off the reserve and return in the future to help build his community: "I want to be successful so that I can come back to my community and give back some of what it gave me". At the time of the interview, he was not only successful in the TYP programme, but he had also completed one year of his undergraduate studies leading to his nursing degree.

Atihk was successful because he prided himself in being highly motivated to study hard. He was well organised, he practised proper time management, and he was a high achiever. He said, "I am proud that I got the opportunity to pursue the TYP on the reserve rather than in the city because I had the chance to be near my family who supported me". He continued, "I love maths and I am good at it. I always want to teach mathematics and when I complete college I am going to go to university to become a math teacher". The desire to become a teacher of mathematics and the motivation of his family were significant for Atihk in his success in this programme.

Mahekan is the only female student who has successfully achieved the outcomes of the TYP, after two years of study. She graduated from high school with honours and was highly

motivated and appreciative that the TYP was offered in her community. For her, “The TYP in Kiwetin represented the perfect environment for me to enjoy the experience since she I was around my family and friends”. During the first year of her TYP experience, Mahekan performed very well up until she went on maternity leave four months into the programme. She displayed the aptitude to learn but did not complete the course until her second time around where she displayed persistence: “I had to achieve my goal to have a medical career as a doctor and that was the motivation behind completing the programme despite an unsuccessful first year”.

When she had to leave to go to the city to have her baby, she said, “I decided to complete the TYP on the campus of the [city university]. It was there that I appreciated the benefits of going to school in my community where I didn’t have to get a job and fight to get transportation to go to school.” According to Mahekan, “It is tough in the city and those few months showed how university is and how you had to do all the studying by yourself... it makes you realize basically what university is”. Since Mahekan had to complete the programme in the city university, her exposure to another TYP for a few months helped her to recognise the benefits of having the TYP in Kiwetin. She spoke about the challenges of a busy life, large classes where she felt the teachers were so impersonal, and she was determined to complete the programme. Mahekan’s real reason for enrolling in the transition programme was because she wanted to become a doctor and she saw her learning experience as meaningful because she learnt how to be appreciative of the reserve TYP after being in the city for a while: “Seeing that I now have a child to support it might take me a bit longer to get to my next goal of enrolling into medical programme but I am persisting”. Up to the time of the interview, Mahekan achieved all the course outcomes and registered in a college in the north that is nearest to Kiwetin to begin her studies that will take her into the medical profession.

Both students and teachers underlined similar reasons as to why given students were successful. According to Bob Denard, the reason why students were successful was attributable to their desire to receive a university degree but many students were not motivated enough to complete the course: "A lot of students who don't go on are not in the place in their life where they want to leave the community". He added, "These students like many others have the perception that university will get you a career. However, only a few of these students are willing to work hard to overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of achieving their goal of completing the programme". It is his perception that there are students who wanted to go on to university but they did not want to leave Kiwetin: "Those students who worked hard and made the TYP experience meaningful, turned out to be the successful ones".

#### **Conception 6: Students see learning as personal fulfilment**

To achieve up to Conceptions 6, students adopt a multifaceted perspective on the world. In this study, the optimal Conceptions 6, involve the student examining things and using various strategies and approaches to achieve the most important goal. At this stage, students know what they need to do to achieve their objective and ensure that they take all the steps and strategies to receive the help they need to reach their goal. Those students who experience meaningful learning are successful because they are self-motivated due to relatively high levels of self-involvement and self-investment in their learning (Platow, Movor, & Grace, 2013). Three students displayed that their experience in the TYP helped them to have an increase understanding of themselves, others and their environment. They had a vision of what they would like to become.

Amisk said that he was able to move on to university because he was capable of envisioning his learning experiences beyond life in Kiwetin: "I visualised an academic education

that would qualify him to leave and return to help my people”. He added, “I was ready to leave Kiwetin because it had nothing more to offer me at that time”. Amisk had advice to others who may be following in his footsteps and attending the TYP: “People, you may not be prepared, but just go in and... make it through, but study hard. It’s far better to do it here, experience it here, where you’re from, around people you know”. Some of the other views that Amisk expressed about the TYP experience included: “it benefitted me because I learned to be more independent... I am responsible for my own learning, and the reality and the reserve are different”. This statement could mean that the experience in the transition programme made him more conscious of his role as a successful FNMI student from the reservation.

Although success was elusive for some of the students, this did not mean that they were not searching for the meaning inherent in pursuing the TYP on the reserve. Regardless of the outcome, all the students who participated in the study felt that experiencing the TYP on the reservation contributed to some positive change in their lives. Mikisew developed a more positive work attitude by the end of year one, and after repeating the programme. Wapask, the student who initially was unsure if he liked the programme, finally decided on a career. He said, “I think now I am ready to decide on what to finally study in university because of the TYP. The experience I had in the TYP helped me to see the relevancy in the learned topics to the career choice I recently made”.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I examined the different themes that affect the teaching and learning experiences by listening to the voices of the FNMI students. These are classified as academic

adjustment as well as student, external, institutional, and sectoral factors respectively. They help readers to understand the approaches taken to learning in the transition programme.

The chapter also highlighted the variations in the students' conceptions of their learning and the teachers' perceptions of these FNMI learners' experiences. Those who were not successful adopted a surface approach characterised by obligation, recalling or retrieving previously learned information, while they attached value to the resources or support they believed were critical to their success in the programme. Purdie and Hattie (2002) have proposed that the higher the level of students' conceptions of learning is in the hierarchy, the more effective their learning.

For the most part, the teachers' perceptions of why the students dropped out or failed the TYP was due to a poor work ethic, inadequate study attitudes, and procrastination which they believe could be a legacy of social passing whereby working hard is not really necessary to pass. Readers can argue that the teachers did not care about the students and but as an insider who is familiar with both students and teachers, this is not so. The teachers do not place blame on students, instead they believe that the system could have done more. For example, if the high school and the college administrations collaborated, they could provide better opportunities and options at the college level by sharing human resources. Notwithstanding this, both the teachers and students shared a positive view on having the TYP in the community, even though it was not equipped with everything that was needed for everyone to succeed academically. In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings using my insider/outsider voice as a former teacher, co-worker and active resident of Kiwetin.

## **CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION**

### **Students' Conceptions of their Learning Experiences**

The main reason why I embarked on this research was to explore FNMI students' conceptions of their learning experiences in an on-reserve TYP using the phenomenographic approach as a lens in order to gain some insights regarding why they believe the on-reserve TYP might not meet the goal of enabling all of them to gain access to university. In an in-depth exploration of their conceptions along with their teachers' perception of their experiences, the findings and analysis on the learning show that these on-reserve FNMI students have qualitatively different ways of experiencing learning in the TYP. Discussions of the phenomenographic analysis of variations of experiences arguably helps to fill in the gaps in the literature about why these on-reserve high school graduates believe they are successful or unsuccessful candidates for university.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, being from a country that has experience the rigours of colonialism gives me a better understanding of certain social and academic contexts, and thereby enables me to access the implications of following a particular system. Writing as the students' former teacher not only makes me familiar with the context and organizational culture of Askihk but I can identify with the FNMI situation as I bring my experience of how my people have 'Caribbeanised' the curriculum to meet the needs of the Caribbean students in that region. Through my research outcomes and teaching experiences, I have come to believe that the key roadblocks to success and what is missing from the TYP for FNMI learners is that the curriculum and instructional strategies do not take into consideration the Indigenous ways of learning in its curriculum, courses, teaching strategies, and resources. Student voices and teachers' perceptions

of the students vividly identified why they adopt either a deep or a surface approach to their learning.

### **Increasing knowledge out of a sense of obligations and expectations (Conception 1)**

As a child growing up in Jamaica, I think that all parents believed that their children could do well in school and it turned out that as long as we attended school, most of us usually did. The expectations of family and teachers, whether positive or negative, have a powerful impact on how students perform. Maxwell and Dornan (1997) assert that expectations often become a reality, confirming that what others believe about their ability creates an atmosphere that makes success seem easier to achieve. Feeling a sense of obligation is a similar phenomenon among students from Eastern cultures. This can be seen in Confucian-heritage cultures, where academic achievement is an obligatory endeavour with students valuing fulfilment of parental and significant others' expectations to the extent that it is considered a social obligation (Tao & Hong, 2014; Zhu et al., 2008). Likewise, I believe that among the Canadian Indigenous people, academic achievement is a way of meeting a filial obligation and cultivating moral character in a culture that values reciprocity, obligation, duty, tradition, dependence, and obedience to authority. However, students experience a sense of duty or obligation for several reasons.

Five out of six students attended the TYP out of a sense of duty to someone in authority, either partly or entirely, and two were unsuccessful. These FNMI students feel indebted to their parents, teachers, and leaders out of a sense of fear of failure (Entwistle, Hanley & Hounsell, 1979; Ridley, 2007), or out of moral respect for them (Tao & Hong, 2014). The conception of fulfilling obligations is 'outside' the influence of the student, thus making the focus on learning appear as a task to appease people. For the FNMI students who have not planned any strategies

for postsecondary education and who fear letting down the people who believe in them, the desire to appease does not provide enough reason for success in the TYP.

My perception is that obligation is insufficient to sustain interest, engagement and meaning since it is not intrinsically motivated and is viewed in light of a cultural emphasis on duty and responsibility (Kretchmar, 2016; Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996). As was mentioned in Chapter 1, the students who enrol in the programme out of a sense of obligation usually exhibit a feeling of fear that they are letting down their significant others. Negative emotions such as guilt and fear encourage surface learning (Kaminiski, 2012) because it is dependent on the approval of others. The stronger the students view this as an obligation, the greater the extent they feel guilty if they fail to complete the programme (Tao & Hong, 2014). That could explain why those who were not successful the first year repeated the course, sometimes multiple times, hoping to gain meaning and qualify for postsecondary education.

Additionally, the findings revealed that students whose conception of learning is based on increasing knowledge out of a sense of obligation also failed the programme if they did not already possess high educational aspirations when they enrolled in the college. Although Indigenous studies demonstrate that one of the factors that contribute to their students' educational persistence and success is the motivation that comes with extending the family/community values within postsecondary education (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, Preston, 2013), it is not sufficient to inspire students to achieve academic success. It is my belief that Maskwa, Wapask and Mikisew failed the programme because their loyalty, commitment and responsibility to parents, teachers or the Elders was sparked by external motivation. Thereby, it was insufficient to sustain engagement when teaching-learning challenges were experienced, so these students adopted a surface approach to their learning.



On the other hand, the students whom this study recognises as successful were self-motivated and goal-driven, displaying a high sense of well-being, a high degree of happiness and lower levels of distress (Telzer & Fuligini, 2009). Boulton-Lewis et al. (2000) have claimed that successful FNMIIs were motivated to learn for three reasons: the desire to improve themselves, their community, and to undertake further study. Two successful students, Amisk and Atihk, expressed that their aspiration and drive to achieve their degrees was because they wanted to return to their community. As a way of giving back to society, they too wanted to use their education as the vehicle to improve conditions for their families and community. For these students, the value placed on obligation and tradition further motivated them to succeed in the TYP.

## **Increasing one's knowledge by completing discrete tasks that seem unrelated (Conception 2)**

The students who adopted this conception to their learning believe that to qualify for university requires just getting through the learning tasks, even if they perceive these to be not related to one another. Their approach to learning entails trying to reproduce a series of separate assignments in order to accomplish a programme that they find to be disconnected courses. This process of learning that seems to revolve around fact finding and explaining concepts can become overwhelming when learning is limited to just focusing on regurgitating information for the sole purpose of gaining credits. It can also be difficult when the students rely on memory without deploying other learning processes.

Neeganagwedgin (2013) recognises that one of shortcomings of the school system for FNMI students is that separate and isolated disciplines are most often not clearly related to any sort of 'real-life' applications and students acquire the content of the lessons through abstract

lectures, memorisation, and drill. The ability to separate and compartmentalise reflects an approach where focus is on inner self-development, individual centred and material values of pursuit such as high grades with no indication of how it is connected to the physical world. An Indigenous approach could provide a holistic worldview where values are intrinsically woven with all the physical aspects of life. For example, if we apply the medicine wheel in a postsecondary context, it symbolises a belief in the interconnectedness of all forms of life with primary importance being attached to Mother Earth. This has implications for how connections are made in the TYP course of study to a long-term view of how the knowledge and activities impact the self, families, community and the world in a holistic way.

It was the teachers who recognised that the students who viewed learning as unrelated tasks could be linked to the practice of social passing within the Indigenous community. One individual felt strongly that the impact of social passing explained the failure rate of students in the TYP because it gives the students a false sense of what constitutes academic achievement. As mentioned in Chapter 2, research indicates that neither grade retention nor social promotion is a successful strategy for improving educational success (Jimerson, Pletcher, Graydon, Schnurr, Nickerson, & Kundert, 2006) as it represents a way of 'getting by' (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). In addition, the teachers felt that the students treated their work as tasks that they needed to complete to obtain grades and since the work was not meaningful to them, this seemed to encourage surface learning. Procrastination, inefficient study habits and a poor work ethic are possible manifestations of not having a sense of purpose, thereby students fail to complete their assignments and fail the courses.

The voices of the teachers helped me to understand why students who adopt Conception 2 could find adjusting academically to postsecondary education very demanding and why they

treat learning as completing tasks, thus adopting a surface approach. The teachers perceived the reasons why the students failed in the TYP as due to their attitude towards their work – a condition resulting from their previous teaching-learning experiences in lower schools and the result of a lack of academic readiness, preparation and trying to get by.

Adjusting academically to the new teaching and learning approaches of the transition programme can seem extremely demanding for students who believe that they had problems in thinking critically and expressing themselves in writing. The literature already reveals that for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike who are transitioning to postsecondary education, a major impediment to success is a lack of skills, accompanied by a deficit in readiness to learn and attitudes such as low self-motivation (Keating, Davis, & Holden, 2006; Platow et al., 2013; Wiebe, 1994). From what the students say, they were expected to work independently at Askihk rather than collaboratively, and most of them complained that the curriculum was designed and taught in a way that encouraged memorising facts, thus making learning seem an unrelated task. For reasons explained below, they adopted a surface approach in trying to recall as many facts as possible to pass the exams, but they could not cope.

Readers will recall that Chapter 2 mentioned that a significant aspect of students' experience was academic, social and emotional (Figure 2.3) with FNMI learners differing in their cognitive organisation of information compared to other learners (Hilberg & Tharp, 2002) in that they tend to organise information holistically (Tharp, 1988) while exhibiting a preference for a collaborative approach to learning (Chavers, 2000). The first principle of Indigenous learning is a preference for experiential knowledge and indigenous pedagogy values that encompass learning by observing, listening and participating (Battiste, 2002). In addition, Hillberg and Thorp (2002) have highlighted that Indigenous people come from a vibrant culture

where they still work in a holistic manner in their community. In the classroom however, they have to adjust to a Eurocentric system of learning as that Pidgeon (2016) has argued, ignoring the holistic interconnection between the spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional needs that indigenous learning propounds and advocates for transformational learning. If learning for these students becomes a matter of just trying to complete some given tasks, then the programme will not succeed in fulfilling their needs as FNMI students.

Based on my experience in Jamaica, it took revising a British model curriculum in order to reflect the local experiences to result in visible improvement in the performance of our students. The government embarked on a programme to upgrade the curriculum to meet the needs of an emerging economy that required more advanced literacy and mathematics skills. By adapting Caribbean teaching programmes, books, resources and examinations that our students could relate to, their experiences of learning became more meaningful. The students in this study who have an attitude perceived by their teachers as negative could be communicating that the curriculum and teaching styles do not resonate with Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. With their culture not given equal play and merit, learning might be viewed as an assortment of unrelated tasks (Catto & Luby, 2013). The teaching strategy used for instruction and teaching piecemeal-content curriculum could potentially be viewed as disconnected and unrelated disciplines rather than holistic if it does not value the ability to learn independently by observing, listening, and participating with a minimum of instruction. The courses might seem uninteresting because they could not see themselves represented in an authentic way in the curriculum. It is also possible that, given demotivation and disengagement, they had reason to procrastinate until the work led to overload, thereby creating undue anxiety about their prospects (Howie &

Bagnall, 2013). Finally, this could encourage a surface learning approach as students become less disengaged and the TYP's purpose loses its relevance.

### **Applying Resources (Conception 3)**

Students adopting Conception 3 conceived that it was the lack of resources that made it difficult for them to do well. In this study, the resources derived from the internal or external institutional environment and included classroom materials, teachers and facilities as well as family, culture, policy and finance. The lack of resources such as library books and the surrounding environment affected both the students' experiences and what they deserved access to while they attended Askihk. Even the teachers perceived that their shortcoming was that they did not receive the professional development required to be resource agents for the students, especially in the distance-learning course. They sensed that if the students were on a university campus, they would have had the resources necessary to enhance their learning experiences.

Research has shown that teaching and learning materials are both logically and empirically associated with academic achievement (Lee & Zuze, 2011). Although there are studies that claim that classroom materials themselves do not bring about change (Kurdziolek, 2011), some students and teachers perceived that the lack of resources impacted negatively on students' experiences in the TYP. The students who depended heavily on the school to supply the materials for their learning expressed frustration that they could not find information in the library. With the lack of educational resources, they felt that it was too much work and not enough help was offered, specifically in the writing courses. Simultaneously, with no assignments coming from students, the teachers perceived them as 'time wasters' who did not care. The students, however, felt that the nature of the instructions made the programme no longer engaging or attractive. In addition, they suggested that the teachers could have acted with

more empathy and be more encouraging. Encouragement in the form of reminders could have made a substantial difference to those students who failed. Some of them thought that the teacher did not care about them because they believed that they were already failing from early on in the programme.

As someone who is familiar with the environment, my own perspective is that some students do not have access to the Internet and were unable to navigate online journals or resources. Without the information that they needed to do the assignments, they preferred not to attend the classes. As a teacher of college students, missing classes and assignments could be interpreted as not caring, wasting time, or not wanting to achieve academically.

Not being engaged in the lessons or not achieving much success could have resulted in these students feeling that the course was no longer relevant to their needs. For example, Mikisew articulated that Askihk lacked a diversity of courses and without any choice she had to do the subjects that were offered. Like the students who missed classes because they could not find the material, learning becomes a mounting struggle that is also boring and depressive (Haggis, 2003). Students were often overwhelmed with coursework that kept piling up because of their poor time management skills and procrastination. Without sufficient motivation, the work accumulated to the point where they were overwhelmed. According to Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons (2002), a perceived increase in workload encourages a surface approach to learning.

Different needs and socialisations contribute to variations in student experiences (Keating, Davis, & Holden, 2006) and although family influence may not affect students' attitudes, it certainly affects their progress. The impact of family stress can act negatively on a student's performance (Irfan & Shabana, 2012; Mushtaq & Khan, 2012). For example, the lack of finance, an external resource resulting from the downturn in their financial situation, caused

stress for Wapask's family, which was supported by a single mother. For his second TYP attempt, he no longer benefitted from the Band tuition stipend and the family situation made it difficult for his mother to finance his study. Like Wapask, Mikisew also attempted to redo the TYP over the course of a second year and had to get a job to pay for her tuition that year. Trying to balance schoolwork and employment made it stressful for these students as they had to compromise their study time. It could be that high anxiety and workloads increased the likelihood of these students using a surface approach to learning which resulted in failing the course a second time.

I believe that the situation with Askihk College is that it was challenging for the institution to provide the human and physical resources necessary to increase students' engagement. The college lacked the course choices, qualified staff, physical resources and programmes compared to other TYPs on university campuses. Due to its remote geographical location, not many qualified personnel are willing to relocate to places that experience temperatures that are often below zero for half the year. The combination of a lack of diversity in the courses and resources, limited choice of subjects, and few qualified teachers who were capable of teaching according to the Indigenous mode of learning was a reality for these students. Even for the teachers, the lack of resources for them as professionals was discouraging. Eventually the programme lost its relevance for the students, causing them to become less and less interested and increasingly disengaged and cynical in respect to their education.

The results of the study were consistent with the findings in Grubb's (2008) research on resources, which states that simple resources such as books might influence student outcomes in some cases, while complex resources such as instructional approaches could also have a significant impact. He also asserts that a learning institution with resources, extracurricular

activities, adequate instructors and counsellors represents a school with a supportive climate. Since a positive environment increases academic scores and attitude, by making the school climate a more supportive place helps with academic achievement and influences progress. In the study, what the students and teachers believe about the school climate makes a substantial difference to their outcomes. The students who were satisfied that Askihk represented a positive climate with adequate resources and support had good academic scores and positive attitudes.

Unlike students who eventually failed the programme (surface approach learners), the academically successful students found alternative ways to get the resources they needed. Even though they were exposed to the same environment, they worked with what Askihk offered in terms of personnel and resources, and completed the programme successfully. For example, Atihk understood that his teachers would have provided the materials for him to succeed academically once he went to seek the information from them.

How the FNMI students conceived of their teaching-learning environment affected their success or failure in the transition programme. Preston and Claypool (2003) looked at how twelve Canadian FNMI high school students in an urban school perceived their success. They alleged that they were successful because they had a friendly school culture with caring and encouraging families and teachers. Similar to Preston and Claypool's (2003) study, some learners in this research perceive that it was the motivational influences of their teachers and the encouragement of their parents, family or significant others that contributed to their successful transition. This suggests that students' approaches to learning can be modified by specific learning situations (Beattie, Collins, & McInnes, 1997).



### Understanding and Enjoyment (Conception 4)

The term 'enjoyment' is not commonly used in conceptions of learning but it was Biggs (1999) who claimed that a deep approach to learning engages with the intrinsic enjoyment of learning. A number of studies show that those students who are engaged cognitively, socially and emotionally, enjoy learning (Wang, Shen, Novak, & Pan, 2009). Conception 4 labelled *students see learning as understanding and enjoyment* is similar to Marton et al.'s (1993) conception labelled *understanding*. Successful candidates for university should demonstrate a quest for meaning and understanding as well the capacity to monitor and relate ideas using evidence (Ridley, 2007). This research revealed that the on-reserve FNMI learners who displayed self-motivation and independent approaches to their learning were successful in the programme because they enjoyed what they were doing. I believe that the main reason for their enjoyment was the fact that they understood the purpose of having the programme in the community. Although these students want to pursue a university education, it is difficult to leave their families to move to the city for a TYP, so they were happy for the opportunity to be with their family and friends as they qualify for a university education. Daychaudhury et al. (2010) has shown that the family background, relationships, education, and income impact positively on students' outcomes. Indigenous ways of learning have always recognised this as depicted in the experiential learning cycle, given its community-based way of teaching that encourages deep learning through action and reflection (Kaminiski, 2012).

In accordance with the findings of Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty (1993), students who were classified as holding conception 4, typically spoke of developing (discovering, finding, searching for) meaning. Oftentimes, the focus for understanding appeared to be related to classroom learning, while the test of that understanding sometimes included the ability to explain

subject matter to another person (Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996). In this study, understanding goes further than the ability to master topics; rather it included the usefulness of the programme as well as the development of the student as a person. It is 'discovering the values and attitudes' that make transitioning from high school to university a successful experience. In other words, it is when the learner develops some meaning in or from the TYP experience.

For instance, Amisk discovered early in the TYP that learning involves more than just the ability to transfer knowledge and that there are other learning attributes that one should understand in order to make it easier to master the courses. When he started college, he perceived that there would be a greater degree of difficulty associated with learning in the transition programme compared to high school. He recalled how in the beginning he thought the work was too 'easy' and it was as if he was in high school again. After procrastinating and almost failing an assignment, he acknowledged that although knowing the content was important, his challenge was to learn to manage his time. Probably one of the most important lessons that Amisk mastered in the TYP programme was the value of time management.

Atihk spoke about enjoying his college experience so much that he was never absent from college. He did not want to miss a day and he spent his non-instructional time accessing information and resource materials that he needed for his assignments when he was not asking the teachers for assistance. Students who understand and enjoy learning at this transitional stage begin to examine things critically. During this conception, students can analyse and evaluate if they made progress by comparing their objectives with those of the programme. Students who approach learning with understanding and enjoyment are those who are already practising good academic skills, efficient study habits and proper time management skills, all of which make

their study enjoyable (Biggs, 1999). Atihk already analysed that his success in the programme was more than being motivated, but it also included a positive work ethic.

The students who had a deep approach to learning and focused on succeeding in the TYP approached their classes with an attitude to succeed. These students developed problem-solving skills even though they had similar drawbacks. Instead of giving up, they found other ways to make the course engaging. For example, Mahekan was not enjoying mathematics because she claimed that the most recent teacher who was added to the staff was having a difficult time communicating with the class. Determined to overcome that obstacle, she sought resources and the help of her high school math teacher who downloaded lessons from the Internet to assist her in understanding the subject.

The responses of Amisk, Atihk, and Mahekan suggest that the on-reserve TYP might not have provided what they wanted, but they understood that to be academically successful meant examining the situation critically, then analysing, and evaluating the actions that they needed to take. I believe that the approaches that they took to their learning was influenced by their perceptions of the relevance of the course, the enthusiasm of some of their teachers and the location of the college in Kiwetin. Many students viewed having the support of their family and friends alongside the small classes as a substantial advantage of the TYP. The small classes were expedient for both teachers and students, and the latter took advantage of the opportunity to receive assistance from the teachers, whom they say were always available when they needed them.

### **Changing and Seeing Something in a Different Way (Conception 5)**

I believe that students who see learning as meaningful by bringing about change in their lives, recognise that learning is a lifelong endeavour or at least something that does not stop after

the TYP. In my Conceptions 5, *students see learning as changing and seeing something in a different way* is similar to Saljo's (1979) Conception 5 – *learning as an interpretative process aimed at understanding reality*. In my conception, learning as changing and seeing things in different ways aim at understanding reality and is conceived in terms of changing as a person. Meanwhile, it is not bound by context or time as it can take place outside of schools and other formal educational settings (Ashong & Commander, 2017). Students who adopted Conceptions 5 understood that the TYP was just a channel for them to develop their learning experience so that university would become more meaningful.

Deep learning strategies, such as making connections and examining things logically, are associated with meaningful learning behaviours (Wen-Yu, Jyh-Chung, & Chin-Chung, 2016). For instance, Mahekan said that while she was a student in the TYP she had a difficult time learning the math concepts. Eventually, however, she found ways to overcome the challenge until she was successful in gaining the credit. In addition, students who adopt this strategic or achieving approach to learning also understood concepts from multiple perspectives and achieved in a variety of ways. She further admitted that she tried to relate to any other subject that she found to be a challenge through that 'math class' experience. Her determination and persistence were not limited to the classroom either, since she said that she was able to rely on this method to eventually complete the programme after she had her baby.

### **Personal Fulfilment (Conception 6)**

Conceptions 6, *students see learning as personal fulfilment*. Students sharing this conception like to do what is meaningful and worthwhile. The ability to adapt to change, develop character and contribute to society are among the facets highlighted in this research. This conception is similar in concept to Marton et al.'s (1993) Conception 6 – *changing as a person*.

Amisk, wanted a university education to become more intellectual and culturally refined, so that he could become a role model in Kiwetin. Motivated by the intrinsic desire to give back to his community, his ambition was to be a professional nurse because he wanted to make a difference as a native person. Atihk also felt the obligation to serve while wanting to make a positive contribution to his culture by becoming a teacher after completing university. Out of respect for his people, he was looking forward to passing on certain traditions to younger generations. He felt that the way to go about this was in the classroom.

In addition, there are some deep learning attributes associated with meaningful learning behaviours. Some researchers have claimed that self-motivation and independent thinking are student factors that are key to successful learning approaches and outcomes in the transition process (Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011; Jensen & Suhre, 2010; Smith & Zhang, 2009). Other research findings on non-Indigenous students showed that major limitations to success involve not only students' lack of skills and deficits in readiness to learn, but also included low self-motivation (Platow et al., 2013; Wiebe, 1994). The three successful students – Amisk, Mahekan and Atihk – saw learning in ways that the others students with limited conceptions of learning did not see. Although there were variations in their experiences, these students were motivated by their pursuit of achievement, and they practised a combination of good study habits, time management and study skills even before beginning the TYP as they strive towards self-actualisation.

Parental education and aspirations affect student performance (Fisher, 2002; Grubb, 2008). In the study, the presence of the family initiated positive social behaviours from every student who participated but did not necessarily affect their academic outcome. I notice that students who have parents who have gone through the education system as far as high school and

beyond are likely to have academically successful children. According to Pidgeon (2008), Indigenous first-generation college students do not necessarily have the cultural capital of prior family experience with postsecondary education. Their knowledge of negotiation is very different from a student whose parents are university educated and are able to translate that form of capital to their children. This implies that first-generation students are less likely to do well.

Two successful students, Amisk and Mikisew, had parents who were high school and university graduates who represented positive role models that influenced and inspired them, not only to enrol in the TYP, but to persevere and complete the programme. Atihk on the other hand, despite being a first-generation student, defied the odds and succeeded in the TYP. Successful students had variations in their level of motivation and aspirations as well as attitudes and behaviour. Both the teachers' perceptions and students' conceptions revealed that the successful students were highly self-motivated and had their career paths planned before going into the TYP.

Finally, students understand that success is not necessarily measured by whether or not they have completed the course but by the maturity level of their achievement. According to Chin and Brown (2000), deep thinking processes are sometimes latent in students and manifest themselves only under optimal conditions. Thus, if left to their own devices, students may not use deep processing strategies. This suggests that students could adopt deep approaches to learning if the situational circumstances and their dispositions were different. There were students who were unsuccessful academically but who learnt valuable lessons about life and approaches to learning. Any student, whether they passed or failed, who learnt time management skills, or who matured emotionally, was changed because of the TYP and had a meaningful experience. Wapask and Mikisew were the two students whom I believe showed that although

they were not successful, they had learned valuable lessons about managing their time and how to study effectively.

### **Limitations of the Deep/Surface Learning Model**

This study's interpretation of the findings into deep and surface learning approaches were in some ways consistent with the literature on students' experiences, conceptions of learning, and factors that influence approach and learning outcomes. Although the students in the TYP approach their study in either a surface (Entwistle et al., 1979; Platow et al., 2013; Ridley, 2007; Zhu et al., 2008) or deep manner (Platow et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2008), both tendencies are insufficient on their own to explain how FNMI students perceive their learning.

Although the concept of the deep and surface approach to learning is important, labelling student learning as adopting a deep/surface dichotomy does not fully explain what is important to FNMI learners. Built upon approaches emerging from academic tasks, the deep and surface learning theory is confined to what people do because of how they perceive their environment (Biggs, 1991; Posser, Trigwell & Taylor, 1994). The model seems to address the encouraging and discouraging factors in the learning environment that stimulate the adoption of different approaches to learning (Howle & Bagnall, 2013; Marton & Booth, 1997; Purdie et al, 1996; Ridley, 2007; Webb, 1997). One critique of the model is that deep or surface approaches to learning only implies that learning is 'good' or 'bad,' and that 'deep' and 'surface' are metaphors for good and bad approaches to learning (Biggs, 1991). The assumption that FNMI students adopting the surface approach will not do as well as those adopting a deep approach contributes to its inadequacy as a model to describe FNMI learners on the reserve.

The model's limitation to tasks also makes it inadequate to explain relationships with people in culture and tradition. The voices of the on-reserve FNMI learners spoke explicitly

about the importance of relationships, culture and tradition to their learning. As was indicated in Chapter 2, educating the FNMIIs includes the social dynamics of relationship to place (land and tradition), and a strong culture of collaboration of Elders, schools and parents within the community (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011; Lavever, 2016). In this chapter however, the deep/surface concept looked at students' learning as adopting an approach based on their perception of their environment (real or not). Their performance is according to their perception of circumstances and learning appears as processes such as obligation, application, completion of tasks, understanding, interpretation and enjoyment. This limited scope of exploring learning as a process ignores the social context of learning, and does not adequately address what is important to the FNMI students. In the next chapter, I will explore some possible factors that contribute to the success of the on-reserve FNMI students in the one-year TYP.



## **CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION**

### **A Reflection on the Study**

The purpose of this research was to use the phenomenography to explore the experiences of FNMI students' conceptions of their learning and their academic achievement in the transition programme using their voices.

I challenged myself to use the phenomenographic approach, which takes a non-dualistic ontological standpoint, to capture the limited number of ways my participants described their experience of the TYP. To give readers a broad explanation, students' experiences in the TYP have been described as 'conceptions' (Marton, 1981), 'understanding' (Sandberg, 2000), 'ways of experiencing', and 'ways of understanding' (Marton & Pong, 2005). Similar to Marton (1982), the study demonstrates that students view their experiences as a combined product of themselves (individuals) and their teaching-learning environment.

I believe that being a past teacher to the students and a fellow teacher in the community, placed me in an advantageous position as I am very familiar with the environment and I understand the links between situations and events in the community. My position provided credibility and rapport with the participants (Mercer, 2007) and, through reflexive thinking, (Clegg & Stevenson, 2013) I am able to remove myself from the account and not prejudice the interview data. Being a teacher from the inside influences the way I probe my participants and how I interpret the transcribed material as I make meaning and offer more insights into deep and surface learning with respect to the on-reserve FNMI learners. I take it as an honour to be in this position because it helps how I interpret the findings; however, there may be other ways that they can be interpreted.

The perspective that this study takes is that students' approach to learning is informed by the learning environment, the curriculum and its effectuation (Webb, 1997). Although I recognise that using the deep and surface model to approach to learning has its weaknesses in terms of scope and social relationship for these on-reserve Indigenous learners, the findings are relevant to how we think about teaching practices, student engagement, and curriculum and syllabus development in college transition programmes on the reserve.

### **Attributes of a Successful Student**

Exploring students' ways of experiencing in this study reveal that those who were successful in the TYP adopted a deep approach to their learning while those who did not achieve the outcomes adopted a surface approach. A surface approach to learning is an indication that the learner is experiencing demotivation, disengagement and loss of interest in the TYP programme. The programme failed the students by not fostering a teaching-learning environment that would foster an inner motivation (Alamdarloo et al., 2013) and encourage the deep approach to learning. The study also implies that those students who qualified for university all exhibited specific attributes that empowered them to achieve the course outcomes. These attributes, shown in Table 9, include self-motivation, independent thinking, effective study habits, proper self-management skills, being able to think logically, the capacity to adapt to change, possession of a readiness to learn and the ability to work independently. These attributes are responsible for the students' success, focusing on the positive elements of the teaching-learning environment potentially leads to adopting a deep approach and success.

High levels of engagement and deep learning approaches occur when students perceive that the value of the programme is high. They become metacognitive or aware of how they are learning and use good judgment resulting in experiences that are more meaningful. They are

encouraged and intrinsically motivated for learning as they used various strategies to approach learning and overcome obstacles encountered in the programme. The students who have a higher level of conceptions of learning select better methods of learning and have high levels of self-motivation. They are independent thinkers with effective study habits, and proper self-management skills. They are capable of thinking logically, are able to adapt to change, possessing the readiness to learn and have the capacity to work independently (Marton, Beaty, & Dall'Alba, 1993; Platov, Mavor, & Grace, 2013; Zhu & Leung, 2011).

Table 9. Student related attributes that are associated with success in the TYP

Student attributes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• self-motivation</li> <li>• independent thinking</li> <li>• effective study habits</li> <li>• self-management skills</li> <li>• logical thinking</li> <li>• adapting to change</li> <li>• readiness to learn</li> <li>• independent learner</li> </ul>

From my experience working with the students, when they were in high school and a few months after they enrolled in the TYP, I believe that they all possessed the capability to achieve the transition programme's outcomes. The students whose conceptions of learning were low in the hierarchy were those who adopted the surface approach and appeared to have minimum engagement with the TYP. FNMI students who adopted a surface approach and whose conception of learning is fulfilling obligations to significant others, undertaking unrelated tasks,

and applying resources could be sending messages about how educators should prepare on-reserve FNMI students for higher education.

If some students were unable to achieve the outcomes of the college, it could be that the programme is not fulfilling its role in helping students to transition to university. The students who adopted a surface approach to learning were implicitly communicating to educators about the nature of the programme. They considered that the TYP failed to live up to their expectations because the programme was not academically and culturally relevant to them. In the experiences of those students, there was no diversity in the choice of courses, the curriculum was not culturally and/or academically engaging, the instructional strategies were not student-centred and there was a deficit of institutional resources. These characteristics of the teaching-learning environment, highlighted in Table 10, were identified as contributing to on-reserve FNMI students adopting surface approaches to learning and they did not achieve the outcomes of the TYP.

Table 10. The variables in the teaching-learning environment that determine approaches to learning

Teaching-learning Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of diverse choice in courses</li> <li>• lack of a culturally and academically engaging curriculum</li> <li>• use of teacher-centred instructional strategies</li> <li>• deficit of institutional resources</li> </ul>

For those who were not experiencing academic success in the Askihk on-reserve TYP, the implication is that the courses offered, the curriculum, the teachers and the institutions are not meeting their goal to bridge the gap between high school and university. Although the

students appreciated the advantages of maintaining close links to their community and the support of their families, there are challenges concerning what and how well the college can offer a transition programme that accomplishes the needs of these FNMI learners. Transition programmes located on the reserves are usually geographically isolated, which generally results in a lack diversity of teachers and resources, with students forced to accept a limited programme in comparison to the TYPs on university campuses.

### **Diverse Course Choices**

Some of the students in this study felt restricted because the courses offered were limited in terms of their relevance to their culture, resulting in the programme becoming no longer meaningful to them. Their lack of engagement could have the reason why they adopted a surface approach to their leaning. Being unsure of what they wanted, they felt they would have benefitted from courses that included more material that is indigenous. The teachers however, being non-Indigenous, were not trained to deliver the indigenous studies that the students wanted. One of the main benefits of a transition programme is to provide culturally relevant learning experiences and academic skills to make higher education more accessible to FNMI learners (ACCC, 2012). For instance, Mikisew who described her interest in the Indigenous aspects of the Canadian history course, was disappointed that, for majority of the course, the curriculum did not focus on its indigenous aspect.

### **A Culturally and Academically Engaging Curriculum**

The modern western education system has successfully been reproduced through Eurocentric curricula that underlie disciplinary-centred approaches to teaching and learning, disciplinary knowledge, and mass education systems (Baker, 2012). While these may be perceived as advantages of Eurocentric education, this study shows that it also results in institutionalized

academic disciplinary boundaries and ideologies that ignore cultural values and indigenous intellectual traditions.

Up until a few decades ago, the Eurocentric curriculum enforced on students with diverse environments, intellectual histories and cultural traditions was never questioned. The inclusion of culture in the curriculum can play an important role in motivating students and leading them to academic success. Cultural relevance has implications for curriculum, instruction, evaluation, and governance (Pidgeon et al., 2014) and the way our curriculums are designed is often not conducive to including Indigenous culture. As it was, the TYP teachings encouraged surface approaches to learning because they lacked the experiential learning or holistic frameworks that define the indigenous curriculum.

Indigenous students could be motivated to learn through an indigenous curriculum that reflects their ways of life thereby increasing engagement (Preston & Claypool, 2003; Zhu & Leung, 2011). The use of storytelling, sign language, engagement with the land, nature, and the outdoors are all critical to the Indigenous culture and the implication for planning and practice is that the curriculum should facilitate opportunities for experiential education. It is possible that the FNMI students in this study who were not goal-oriented and found the course options restricting, whereas they could be motivated to learn through an indigenous curriculum. Yunkaporta (2009) asserts that if educators begin applying the Indigenous processes to the Western knowledge curriculum system, this could motivate students and increase the academic success of the FNMI learner. Since student life extends beyond the institutions' curriculum, Indigenous culture can also be linked to the latter's curriculum through participation in extracurricular activities such as clubs and societies and volunteer services within the community. The aspirations of students from closely-knit communities in isolated locations such

as the reserves are often connected to their social networks, the intergenerational connection with the land, and Indigenous ways of thinking (Zhu et al., 2008). It is believed that supportive interactions are important in helping to bolster or maintain healthy self-esteem (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991). An important characteristic of Indigenous culture is the community involvement in learning, however, at Askihk, there were no organised extracurricular activities to provide the cultural interactions for the FNMI students to foster healthy social relationships, agency, and reflexivity. According to Kahn (2017), extracurricular activities provide a focus for morphogenesis, the process of developing corporate agency, culture, or structure over time.

### **Student-Centred Instructional Strategies**

According to Alvares (2011), under the Eurocentric education curriculum, the printed textbook reigns supreme because academics were more comfortable with books than with the real world from which the text could safely isolate them. There is no question that textbooks are important tools for learning. However, in my experience, since their use was for the continued maintenance, expansion, and survival of the western intellectual paradigm - its approved way of thinking, seeing, understanding and being – this led to the ultimate exclusion of many FNMI students. As we rethink critically with indigenous intellectual traditions in mind, there needs to be a shift in focus from a teacher dominant curriculum, and one that is dependent on textbooks, to one that harmonizes with students from diverse environments.

The effects of a teacher-centred Eurocentric education system imposed on the Indigenous learners contributes to why these learners have not kept pace with non-Indigenous in university (Battiste, 2000, 2002, 2003; Caito & Luby, 2013; Cottrell, 2010; Preston & Pearce, 2012). To extend this assertion, the literature unequivocally asserts that the Eurocentric education model does not honour the heritage, knowledge, or spirit of Indigenous learners (Battiste, 2002; BC

Teachers' Federation of Aboriginal Education, n.d.; Faehlich, 2012; Neeganagwedgin, 2010; Nguyen, 2011), resulting in the disparities that currently exist in the educational system. Hillberg and Thorp (2002) have highlighted that First Nations people come from a vibrant culture where they still work in a holistic manner in their community. In the classroom, however, they have to adjust to a Eurocentric system of learning that, as Pidgeon (2016) proposes, ignores the holistic interconnection between their spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional needs.

For the FNMI student, a student-centred instruction integrates indigenous perspectives at the level of intended learning outcomes, incorporating Indigenous learning resources such as Indigenous literature, and weaving in those Indigenous pedagogical practices documented as effective, such as sharing circles (Kanu, 2007). It also integrates assessments such as the use of journals and portfolios, which Aboriginal curricular developers have proven to be effective and responsive with Aboriginal students. Indeed, the holistic framework considers that the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual being with its continuous interconnections should increase students' engagement and most likely foster a deep approach to learning. Indigenous learning propounds and advocates for transformational learning, which should be the main purpose of the transitional programme.

### **Diverse Institutional Resources**

The institution has an important role in providing students with the necessary resources for skills acquisition as well as achievement. The students and teachers in the TYP felt segregated on the reserve when they realised that their amenities did not compare favourably with the TYPs on the university campuses. In addition, the teaching-learning environment and the teachers' impact on students' experiences and learning approaches are the most important resources in the institution. Teachers' quality of instruction and their approach to teaching



directly impact on the learning outcome of students (Ames, 1992; Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Saenz, Marcoulides, Jum, & Young, 1999). The lack of material such as library materials, technology, and human resources such as access to teachers, negatively affected how the unsuccessful students perceived their learning in the TYP.

Students who depend on resources such as teaching style and other structural features of the learning environment adopt a surface approach to learning (Platow, Movor, & Grace, 2013) because tangible and concrete resources increase experiential learning and facilitate a deeper approach. Even though the high achievers in the TYP seemed less affected by the lack of resources, that does not mean that providing adequate resources for students is unimportant in transformational learning. The TYP could be more meaningful to the Aboriginal student if there were faculty staff able to deliver and support Aboriginal teachings and act as their mentors and role models.

### **Recommendations for Improvements**

If there is to be any improvement in postsecondary education for Aboriginals, Canada should assert strongly and publicly that Aboriginal knowledge is an integral and essential part of the nation's legacy (Battiste, 2002). From the responses given by the students, the first recommendations for improving the TYP at Askihk College should be based on making changes in the institutional teaching by ensuring that indigenous knowledge is respected and promoted in the programme. Although the students' responsibility is to pass the courses, it is the responsibility of the administration and the teachers of Askihk Community College to keep the students motivated after they enrol them in the college. Offering indigenous pedagogy could be an avenue by which students might become more motivated and engaged in the learning experience since their culture is recognised.

I strongly believe that the students who adopted a surface approach lost the key factor that drives better learning and achievement – motivation. Motivation is the reason for wanting to do well in school and it is the key factor that drives better learning and achievement (King & Ganotice, 2015). Students have a responsibility to construct their own learning through their sense of purpose, (Benkendorff et al., 2009), and one reason why they fail could be because of a lack of self-motivation, mental perseverance, and not applying all the energy in their power to gain the knowledge required for success (Cherif et al., 2013). However, it is also important to be cognisant of the environment through which learning was taking place. According to Froiland, Oros, Smith, and Hirschert (2012), learners who are motivated intrinsically are more inclined to expend greater effort and achieve more because they are directed or motivated by their self-efficacy beliefs, value beliefs, goals, and interests.

My second recommendation is that teachers and the administration of the high school and college should work together to improve the quality of the programme to keep most of the students motivated and interested. To motivate interest and ensure the students are engaged both faculty and administrators should come together to define:

- the knowledge, skills and values that they would like a successful graduate of the transition programme to have;
- the pedagogy and learning assessment that will most likely lead to the acquisition of the desired attributes of a transition programme;
- the necessary resources to initiate and sustain the programme and appropriate incentives for faculty to participate and;
- the commitment of both faculty and administration to formulate, implement and assess the results and make modifications when necessary.

If the college wants the students to meet the programme outcomes, it is imperative that the quality of the courses is improved to encourage deep learning.

From the responses of the teachers detailed in the earlier sections, one could sense that they believed that more professional development and the provision of supportive measures for the students would have had a more positive impact on student experiences. My third recommendation, therefore, is for the college to make a commitment to improving teachers' resources. Quality resources can be powerful in terms of effecting successful outcomes (Grubb, 2008), so it is important that the teachers are provided with opportunities to learn in order to teach. This might involve implementing an extensive teaching improvement programme that will involve faculty and administration cooperating and working together to ensure total quality management. Fielder and Brent (1999) in their research on how to improve the quality of teaching suggested that administrators must provide resources for their institution's faculty to implement measures that will improve the instructional programme.

In respect to Askihk College, this will mean providing opportunities for teachers to participate in the appropriate professional development they will need to make the necessary changes to the courses and programmes that they offer. Teachers would be equipped with the training and support they need to implement methods in imparting the content that will encourage a deep approach to learning.

Finally, other recommendations for future improvements of the transition programme that were derived from the findings include:

- Get students involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of some programmes;

- Help students develop study skills that are important to succeed in the transition programme;
- Link with other on-reserve transition programmes and share ideas and resources that are teacher- and student-related;
- Promote positive relationships in the school by forming interrelationships with the high school through summer programmes for students transitioning into the TYP;
- Liaise with businesses in the community that employ students and make recommendations as to how they can gainfully employ them without depriving them of adequate study time.

### **Summary of the Study**

Six on-reserve students (three males and three females), and two teachers participated in this study and, by deploying a phenomenographic methodology, it was possible to explore the variations in their experiences, thereby uncovering two distinct approaches to learning (deep and surface), and six different conceptions of the one-year college transition year programme they partook in.

In this study, success means to complete the programme outcomes so that students can access a university education. Three students met the course outcomes. The two males completed the programme and qualified for university within the specified timeframe of a year. Due to medical reasons, the only successful female repeated part of the year to eventually achieve the outcomes. Another female and a male pursued the programme for a second year and, up to the time of their interviews, they were still trying to complete the programme for a third time with

the hope of passing all their courses. Only one student, a female, dropped out completely a few weeks after beginning the course.

The deep and surface approach learning model was used to explore why some on-reserve Aboriginals adopted a particular approach to learning. According to the model, for most students who adopted a surface approach to learning, engagement with learning appear to be based on a sense of social obligation to their family or another respected person, completing tasks, or applying resources. Conversely, students who adopted the deep approach seem to understand, and enjoy their learning and create opportunities.

The deep/surface model used to explore the voices of the on-reserve Aboriginal students provided a vivid picture that allowed me to identify why the students were successful or not in the TYP. They also added knowledge as to why the students believe they were succeeding or not succeeding. This knowledge can provide insights regarding how to improve instructions, programming and learning environments (Marton, Dall'Alba, & Beaty, 1993; Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1997; Ramsden, 1992), thereby engaging the on-reserve Aboriginal learner. However, deep and surface approaches ignore that the process of learning is inherently social as it explores learning as tasks and processes.

Coming from a collectivist culture (Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002; Pin, 2005), the Indigenous' perspective entails making meaning from direct experiences on the land, through traditions and ceremonies while relying on Elders and family support. The deep/surface model ignores that student learning involves engaging with experiences, reflecting upon them and acting. This is precisely what the Indigenous holistic concept of experiential learning promotes (Kind, Irwin, Grauer, & De Cosser, 2005) and presents another way of exploring these FNMI students.

### **Importance of the Study**

This is the first phenomenographic study, to my knowledge, that explores the lived experiences of high school, on-reserve Canadian Indigenous learners in a college transition year programme. In addition, using a phenomenographic approach to investigate and understand the conceptions of experiences of on-reserve FNMI students allows one to see variations in experiences and determine how those variations affected students' success.

When students and teachers say the same thing, it means they have a shared understanding of what is going on. It also means that students' experiences and the teachers' perceptions of their experiences are viewed in the same way in the eyes of the teachers and the students. Another example in variation of experiences concerns teachers' support of students. Some students felt that the teachers in some areas were not supporting them while teachers perceived that students really do not need the support, thereby neglecting the real problem. Along with variations in perspectives between teachers and students, there are also differences within the groups. Some students were successful while others were not and some were motivated while others were not.

By listening to the students' voices, it is possible that the findings will help inform the programme on areas to be improved and strengthened. This does not necessarily have to be on the same reservation, it can be on any other reservation with a similar socio-economic context that also provides their high school graduates with the opportunity to pursue the TYP in their community.

### **Challenges**

The main difficulty I experienced in this study concerned the large volume of work that I had to do as a lone researcher in the data analysis stage to address academic rigour and research

quality. Usually a phenomenographic research approach takes a team of investigators who work independently and then come together to triangulate and verify the categories and variations from the data (Ziegenfuss, 2007). As an independent researcher working on a doctoral thesis, I took many hours discovering and developing themes and categories of descriptions drawing on the interview transcripts. The interpretations I made of the transcripts had to be verified by the participants before I considered them valid. This process of clarifying the descriptive account of the different ways in which the participants conceived of their experiences in the TYP also took a substantial amount of time.

Without the assistance of appropriate software, I used discovery methods and the theoretical models adopted to guide the data analysis (Benkendorff et al., 2009; Marton et al., 1993), while constantly checking them against the data. By utilising thematic networks, a thematic tool adapted from Attride-Sterling (2011), I was able to ensure rigour, quality, and reduced researcher bias in my analysis. The process of identifying possible themes, comparing and contrasting themes, and identifying structures among them was very laborious but necessary to establish the students' background. The approach I took to manage the data was based on the descriptions provided by Bowden and Walsh (2000). This method helped me to illuminate some of the aspect of the categories of description and led to further clarifications of the data.

Appendix J shows the steps I followed using this approach.

One challenge of a phenomenographic study is the impracticality of avoiding the influence of preconceptions throughout the process of data collection and analysis. As a researcher, even with very little experience, another challenge is to set aside any prior assumptions based on my past as the students' teachers while exploring their experiences in the transition year programme. Fortunately, there are appropriate tools that researchers can use to

address validity and reliability. Validity checks were conducted using both a communicative validity check and a pragmatic validity check (Akerlind, 2012). I applied the communicative check through the learning community, seminars, conference presentations and peer-reviewed journals; thereby aspects of the thesis were presented to and verified by other researchers and my fellow cohorts.

The reliability of a research study depends on the extent to which it is consistent over time (Golafshani, 2003), therefore the appropriate methodological procedure that I chose had to be convenient while simultaneously ensuring quality. I used a dialogic reliability check (Akerlind, 2012) where agreement between researchers is reached through discussion and mutual critique of the data and research interpretation. Since this is a doctoral thesis, discussions were constantly held with my primary supervisor and peers from my cohort at the University of Liverpool to ensure reliability. Finally, after in excess of two years, with the help of my peer who acted in the role of an independent researcher, as well as the primary and secondary supervisors, this phenomenographic study of students' experiences in a college transition programme was completed. My independent researcher was also undertaking an indigenous-based study at the University of Liverpool.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Most transition programmes are found on university campuses and cater to larger populations compared to the FNMI student body. Usually, these on-campus transition programmes are equipped with the resources for all learning styles, and more teachers are available to offer more resources (University of Manitoba, n.d.; University of Winnipeg, n.d.). The limitation of this study is that it was conducted in one small reservation in northern Canada, with six students out of a total of seven in three years, and two teachers in the transition



programme. Although the findings are considered very important, I would like to point out that due to the small number of students in the programme and the study, the observations made cannot be generalised to represent all on-reserve FNMI students. Readers, however can appreciate these students through a detailed analysis of the themes that emerged based on their voices. The findings may apply to unique programmes such as this where there is a small transition programme for FNMI students on another remote reservation. There is a need for more research on different sites on and off the reserve for comparisons to be made about the effectiveness of transition programmes in general.

### **Implications for Practice**

The research presented has important theoretical and practical implications. At a theoretical level, empirical evidence has been provided to further develop the link between on-reserve FNMI learners' perceptions of learning and their approaches as identified in this study. The implications for practice are clear. By listening to the students' voices as they describe their conceptions of their experience, the findings of this research show that Indigenous knowledge fill the ethical and knowledge gaps in Eurocentric education. Exploring their responses may offer postsecondary teachers, insights into the ways in which on-reserve FNMI learners go about learning and what we should do if we want students to experience learning in the TYP. According to Indigenous scholars, by allowing educators insights as to how to identify the best fit between the expectations of these learners and the given postsecondary institution (Gazeley & Aynsley, 2012; OECD, 2003), this research may help to improve plans and strategies for other students who are represented as an ethnic minority in Canada or elsewhere.

Similar to other researchers, I agree that the effects of the Eurocentric education system imposed on the FNMI learners contribute to why these learners are not keeping pace with non-

Indigenous in university (Battiste, 2000, 2002, 2003; Caito & Luby, 2013; Cottrell, 2010; Preston & Pearce, 2012). To extend this assertion, the literature unequivocally claims that the Eurocentric education model does not honour the heritage, knowledge, and spirit of Indigenous learners (Battiste, 2002; BC Teachers' Federation of Aboriginal Education, n.d.; Faehlich, 2012; Neeganagwedgin, 2010; Nguyen, 2011), resulting in the disparities that currently exist in the educational system. Furthermore, cognitive learning styles (Hillberg & Thorp, 2002), a lack of engagement due to the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture, and how the TYP was presented might also explain why FNMIIs are underachievers in the Canadian education system.

For my own practice, this study has influenced the ways I teach by improving my methodology to accommodate the FNMI learner. As an alternative to Eurocentric systems, indigenous learning offers a way of reorganizing teaching and learning that brings together non-indigenous and indigenous culture and knowledge systems for students to learn, compare, and move backward and forward while considering the best knowledge systems that best contribute to addressing particular needs. For example, in science education, combining Eurocentric and Indigenous knowledge of nature might best address the concerns with preserving biodiversity. Hence, designing and teaching an Indigenous knowledge system is one way to transcend the Eurocentric curriculum in a complex higher education environment.

As I rethink critically with indigenous intellectual traditions in mind, I imagine that I can stimulate more interest by including the contribution of Indigenous knowledge, innovations and practices to the teaching of the science curriculum. For a better understanding of sustainable development, drawing on the experiences of the Elders in the community will be an integral part

of my teaching of science in the future so that students will be given the opportunity to experience the holistic concept of experiential learning.

This interpretive study provides a deeper understanding of the transition process of on-reserve FNMI students from high school to university. The primary objective of the research was listening to (and interpreting) the voice of FNMI students and their teachers, describing their conceptions and perceptions of their experiences in the period between high school and university. The findings of this phenomenographic study are a realistic representation of the on-reserve FNMI's experiences and an understanding of their teachers' perceptions of their experiences in the college TYP in their community.

As a change agent, I will continue to use my voice through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Call to Action, to call out the federal, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments to commit to eliminate educational gaps between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Canadian. The study offers insights as to how to identify the best fit between expectations of learners and institutions. I will continue to let on-reserve students in TYPs' voices be heard by sharing the research through publications in journals and peer reviews. Just as important, is sharing the findings and recommendations with the institution being studied, and work along with them to improve plans and strategies for new students entering the college.

Already, efforts to indigenize postsecondary education are earnestly undertaken by Indigenous scholars and advocates in Canada. Postsecondary institutions are taking a firm decision to commit to methodology and methods that are in harmony with Indigenous cultural values, environment and life. Universities are engaging in the politics of inclusion and representation in various ways such as building First Peoples Houses or campus long houses;

offering Native Studies courses and implementing Indigenous programming; and discussing how to improve Indigenous teaching through research in ceremony, storytelling and rituals as texts.

### **Future research**

This research presents the gateway for further exploration to be made on what motivates FNMI students to succeed. It appears as if obligations to parents, teachers, and significant others play a much stronger role than I anticipated before embarking on this study. The focus of the study was on experiences in learning and did not go into the overall experiences of the students. As such, this is recommended for future studies.

The research can also be extended to exploring the experiences of a new cohort of students after implementing the changes I have recommended. A comparison can then be made to prove if improving the communicative and cognitive skills and academic content will result in more students experiencing success in the transition programme.

Another study can also be done comparing the success rate of FNMI students on the reserve versus FNMI students in university transition programmes. Other variables that could be examined might include the impact of sharing classes with non-Indigenous students versus all FNMI students in the programme. Does having inter-racial classes affect the success rate of FNMI learners in the transition to university?

In analysing the responses detailed in this thesis, it was established that both students and teachers identified the geographical location as having an effect on the TYP. Attending the TYP in their community was believed to be positive since it reduces the likelihood of institutionalised racism and stereotyping of FNMI learners. Further research might be undertaken to compare the on-campus TYP with the on-reserve variant to determine whether the characteristics of each institution contribute to the academic success of FNMI learners.

### **Key Messages**

Although there are studies ascertaining why Canadian Indigenous learners are underachievers in university, there are no available studies that explore different aspects of the experiences of on-reserve FNMI students transitioning from high school to postsecondary education. This dissertation's results describe how FNMI students feel about an on-reserve TYP. For the first time, the voices of the students and teachers in the programme will be on record, and the findings will make a valid contribution to the literature on transition programmes. Their voices provided not only a vivid picture identifying what may be the problems with the transition programme on this reservation, they also added knowledge as to why the students believe they were either succeeding or not.

In addition, this research provides empirical evidence of different experiences of the TYP as articulated by the students and teachers in one on-reserve college transition programme, in one small community. It is worthwhile that the students of Kiwetin Reserve do not have to leave their families and their community to qualify for a university education. Another key message is that Askihk College should improve its TYP to on-reserve students to include more diversity in its students, teachers, and resources, as well as adopting a holistic curriculum to encourage more transformative learning.

An important thing to take away from this research is that on-reserve FNMI students' culture, traditions, and learning styles are very significant in their learning approach and experiences. The voices of the students pointed out the weakness of using the deep and surface approaches to model how FNMI students approach learning. Its limitation to scope and tasks does not fully address what is important to the Indigenous people – relationships and location of learning. Students expressing how they feel about their experiences as well as the teachers'

perceptions of their experiences will not only generate knowledge to improve the college TYP but will also encourage future students who read about them to be successful.

Finally, the main purpose of looking at students' experiences using a phenomenographic approach is because it offers a rich description of the various experiences that emerge in different learning environments. Methodologically, phenomenography enlightens the processes of learning in postsecondary education in a way that benefits both students and teachers. It provides new opportunities to investigate what students and teachers say contributed to their failure or success in the programme. Readers should understand that the interpretation of the study is discussed from the point of view of the researcher. A similar study by another researcher could yield a different interpretation of the results. Although the findings cannot be generalised, it does confirm that no single indigenous experience dominates other perspectives. It also demonstrates that students' conceptions of their learning will vary because their experiences are different. This will assist educators in the future in improving student learning among on-reserve and other First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities.

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## Appendix A

### Ethics Approval Form

Researcher Name: Charmaine Condappa	Reviewer name (Doctoral Tutor): Viola Manokore	Date of Review: February 4, 2015
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Each of the ethical criteria below must be adequately addressed by the researcher in order to obtain ethics approval.

The **RESEARCHER** should perform a self-check using these questions before submitting the ethics form to the Doctoral Tutor.

The **ETHICS REVIEWER (Doctoral Tutor)** should complete the yellow column for each question to indicate whether revisions are required for ethics approval. The Doctoral Tutor should also render a decision at the end of this form.

The **RESEARCHER** must respond in the blue column when resubmitting ethics materials.

	<b>Ethics Reviewer's assessment:</b>  (In each row, the Ethics Reviewer should either type "yes" or "no." With each "no," the reviewer must specify what revisions are needed to which specific parts of the ethics application to obtain ethics approval.)	<b>Researcher response:</b>  The researcher must use this column to <u>describe how and where</u> each of the ethics reviewer's concerns (in the yellow column) has been addressed.
1. How has the researcher proactively managed any potential conflicts of interest?	There are minimal potential conflicts of interest because research participants are her former students. The teacher participants are her former colleagues.	<p>Your participation is totally voluntary and even if you begin participation, you are free to withdraw anytime without explanation or penalty. If you choose not to participate, no data related to you or your work will be used or reported in the research study.</p> <p>It is not anticipated that you will experience any risks, harm or expenses from participation in this study. Should you experience any discomfort as a result of your participation, please inform the primary researcher immediately</p>

2. How will the data be stored for at least 5 years with adequate provisions to maintain the confidentiality of the data?	Recordings and transcripts to be stored in the students' password protected computer at her home.	Anonymous data generated from participants in this study will be stored for five years in the researcher's secured personal Google doc storage that is password protected.
3. How will research subjects' identities and contact info be adequately protected? For secondary data analyses, the proposal must clearly state when/how de-identification will occur.	Pseudonyms will be used during analysis and in the thesis write-up	Anonymous names will be used instead of the real names. The researcher will not disclose to any third party that you participated in this study. Any data you generate will be kept anonymous.
4. Has the participant been provided adequate time to review the participant information sheet and given opportunity to ask questions before giving consent?	Charmaine (student researcher) will explain the purpose of the study to the participants. Participants will be given at least a week to review the information before signing consenting letters. Participants are given opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification before giving consent.	The participants will be given a minimum of one week from the receipt of the participation information sheet to review and give their consent to participate in the research. This is enough time to ask for clarifications and consider whether or not to participate in the project.
5. Was informed consent appropriately acquired with a consent signature?	Yes, only those who sign consent letters will participate in the study	Informed consent has been defined by Dierner and Crandall as 'the procedures in which individual choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of the facts that would be likely to influence their decisions (Dierner & Crandall, 1978, pp. 57). The participant will not be a contributor to the research unless he or she has signed the consent form given by the researcher. These forms will also be kept in a safe desk drawer under lock and key at Helen Betty Osborne Ininiw Resource Centre.
6. Was the participant information sheet (PIS) written using language that was understandable to potential participants?	Yes, participants are Canadians who are fluent in English and the PIS is in English	The participation information sheet is written in a language that should be understood by students and teachers who will be the participants in this study.
7. Did the PIS include an understandable explanation of the research purpose?	Yes the PIS explains the main objective of the study	The purpose of this research include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To explore Aboriginal students' experiences in a transitional program at Atoskiwin Training and Employment Centre</li> <li>To identify the extent to which Atoskiwin Training and Employment Centre (ATEC) is</li> </ul>

		<p>preparing students for postgraduate studies in the Transition Year Program (TYP).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To examine how understanding the experiences of on-reserve First Nations students in ATEC's TYP makes it possible to provide support for other learners as they transition to postsecondary education.</li> </ul>
8. Did the PIS include a description of anticipated benefits to subjects or others?	The PIS explains that there are no direct benefits to participants and that the findings might benefit future students enrolled in the program	There will be no tangible benefits or compensation given for participating in the research and this will be stated on the participation information sheet.
9. Did the PIS explain how the participant can contact the researcher and the university's Research Participant Advocate? (USA number 001-612-312-1210) or email address <a href="mailto:liverpoolethics@ohcampus.com">liverpoolethics@ohcampus.com</a> ).	Yes it has both phone number and email address	Yes - see Participant information sheet. All the necessary contact information will be stated on the participation information sheet.
10. Did the PIS include a statement that the participant should keep/print a copy of the PIS?	Yes	The participation information statement stated that the participant should keep a copy for his or her own file.
11. If the researcher happens to also serve in a trusted or authoritative role to the participant (e.g., health care provider, teacher, etc.), did the recruitment procedures ensure voluntary participation?	N/A	Not applicable

**Appendix B**  
**Permission Letter**

Wednesday, October 25, [REDACTED]

Mr. [REDACTED], Director of [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

**RE: Charmaine Condappa's 2014 Study: "A phenomenographic study of on-reserve Aboriginal students in a one-year transition programme"**

To Whom it May Concern:

Please be advised that as the former Chief of [REDACTED] nation and the current director of [REDACTED], I had previously granted Mrs. Charmaine Condappa permission to conduct the following study in [REDACTED] that began in 2014:

"A phenomenographic study of on-reserve Aboriginal students in a one-year transition programme".

Please feel free to contact me if you have any further questions.

Ekosani,

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED], Director of [REDACTED]



## Appendix C

## Consent Form



## CONSENT FORM

**Title of Research:** A phenomenographic study of Aboriginal Students' Experiences in a College Transition Program

**Researcher(s):** Charmaine Condappa

Please  
initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated [DATE] for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected.

☐

3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish.

☐

4. I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person taking consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

**The contact details of lead Researcher Charmaine Condappa (Principal Investigator) are:**

Charmaine Condappa  
Helen Betty Osborne Ininiw Education Resource Centre  
Frontier School Division  
Telephone number: 2043594100  
Email: Charmaine.condappa@frontiersd.mb.ca

## APPENDIX D

## Participation Information Sheet for Student



## Participation Information Sheet for Student

**Title of Study**

A phenomenographic study of Aboriginal Students' Experiences in a College Transition Program

**Invitation Paragraph**

Dear [Student's name],

You are being invited to participate in a research study that I would like to conduct as part of my doctoral studies with the University of Liverpool. Participation in this study will take about 30 – 45 minutes of your time. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand that it will be on your experience as an Aboriginal student who was enrolled in a transition college program at Atoskiwin Training and Employment Centre. Please take time to read the following information carefully and if there is anything that is not clear please feel free to ask me. You are at liberty to decline this invitation if it is inconvenient to you however in this case I would appreciate it if you referred me to another able former student of ATEC. Thank you for reading this.

**The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to explore Aboriginal students' experiences in the college transition year program at (ATEC). This study will also seek to understand how your experience as well as others in the programme will make it possible for other learners who are coming after you succeed as they too transition to post-secondary education.

You have been chosen to participate because you have been through the programme at the Atoskiwin Training and Education Centre. You will be asked to participate in a student interview that is designed to capture your conceptions about your learning experiences in the transition program and the purpose of the program to you as well as the experiences as an on-reserve student. The results of my analysis will be shared with you after the study have been completed.

After accepting this invitation if you choose to withdraw and not participate in the research study, you may do so without prejudice. However, if you decide to take part you can be assured that there are no anticipated risks involved and the data collected will be confidential. In the unlikely event that you feel any discomfort during the interview, please let me know. Your name will not appear in any research report. If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me know by contacting me at the telephone number 204-3016940 or email me at [charmaine.condappa@frontiersd.mb.ca](mailto:charmaine.condappa@frontiersd.mb.ca).

Yours truly,

.....

I ..... have agreed to participate in this research.

Date: .....

Participation Information Sheet for Student.. CCondappa  
January 2015

## Appendix E

### Participation Information Sheet for Teacher



### Participation Information Sheet for Teachers

#### Title of Study

A phenomenographic study of Aboriginal Students' Experiences in a College Transition Program

#### Invitation Paragraph

Dear [Teacher's name],

You are being invited to participate in a research study that I would like to conduct as part of my doctoral studies at the University of Liverpool. Participation in this study will take about 30-45 minutes of your time. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand that it will be on the experiences of Aboriginal students enrolled in a transition college program while living on a reserve in Northern Canada. Please take time to read the following information carefully and if there is anything that is not clear please feel free to ask me. You are at liberty to decline this invitation if it is inconvenient to you however this is the case I would appreciate it if you referred me to another able employee. Thank you for reading this.

#### The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore Aboriginal students' experiences in the transition year program at Atoskiwin Training and Employment Centre. This study will also seek to understand how the experiences of these on-reserve First Nations students make it possible for other learners as they transition to post-secondary education. You have been chosen to participate because you are an instructor/ administrator at the Atoskiwin Training and Education Centre. You will be asked to participate in a teacher interview that is designed to capture teachers' perspectives on Aboriginal students' experiences in the college transition program. The questions will seek to find out how the contributions of student engagement (pre-college academic skills) intervention help in student retention and success in First Nation students transitioning to the post-secondary level and how the teachers fill the gap with the transition year curriculum.

After accepting this invitation if you choose to withdraw and not participate in the research study, you may do so without prejudice. However, if you decide to take part you can be assured that there are no risks involved and the data collected will be confidential. In the unlikely event that you feel any discomfort during the interview, please let me know. There are no gifts that you will get for participating in this study. If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me know by contacting me at the telephone number 204-3016940.

Yours truly,

.....

I ..... have agreed to participate in this research.

Date: .....

## **Appendix F**

### **TYP Students Interview Guide**

1. Why did you enrol in the one-year Transitional Year Programme (TYP) at Atoskiwin Training and Employment Center (ATEC)?
2. How did you hear about the programme?
3. What do you think affected your teaching-learning experiences?
4. What were your career goals when you enrolled in the programme?
5. Do you think that you were properly prepared from high school for the TYP?
6. What did you like about the programme?
7. What do you see as deficiencies in the programme?
8. What aspect of the curriculum have you benefitted from and you think will help you in university?
9. In what ways did the teachers in the college help you to cope with the work in the programme?
10. If you did not complete the one-year TYP can you explain the challenges that you faced and suggest what ATEC could have done to encourage you to complete the programme?
11. If you completed the TYP within the year how do you feel about how prepared you are for the challenges of postsecondary education?
12. What social and financial support would make learning easier and success more achievable for you?
13. What are the benefits you can see in having a TYP on the reservation versus off the reserve?
14. What is your perception about your learning during this TYP?

## **Appendix G**

### **TYP Teachers Interview Guide**

1. What are your perceptions about the students' experiences in the transitional program?
  - Performance
  - Readiness
  - Attitudes towards learning
2. What are the shortcomings in the high school programme why there is a need for a TYP programme for successful graduates of NNOC?
3. Is the high school curriculum ensuring challenge and progression in learning through imaginative, well-judged teaching, leading to the achievement of high levels of understanding and skills needed for university?
4. How does the college plan to ensure that all these high school graduates achieve the outcomes which comprise a broad general education and that they have suitable opportunities for choice and specialization?
5. How can the instructors of both NNOC (high school) and ATEC (community college) work collectively to ensure that the young adult learners make successful transitions between stage from high school and university?
6. Describe the TYP programme and the various ways it was delivered to the students
7. What should the structural design of a TYP curriculum have to enable all learners to benefit from the experiences as well as achieve the outcomes guiding them smoothly into the university first year?
8. Assessment plays a central role in tracking and facilitating progress in learning. Is ATEC putting in place any arrangements to support teachers in their assessment of learning so that they and society can have confidence in their judgments?
9. In your opinion, what could the students have done to be more successful in the programme?
10. How could ATEC make the programme more engaging for students?
11. What are some of the constraints that teachers and students face in delivering the TYP on a reservation versus off the reservation?
12. What is your perception about the students' experiences during this programme?

**Appendix H****Codes Developed from the Transcript**

Table showing the Codes

- 1. Readiness**
- 2. Course challenges**
- 3. Mathematics teacher**
- 4. Writing assignments**
- 5. Teaching styles**
- 6. Computer-based teaching**
- 7. Job**
- 8. Homework**
- 9. Motivation**
- 10. Self-concept**
- 11. Preparation**
- 12. Procrastination**
- 13. Success**
- 14. Failure**
- 15. Choice**
- 16. Diversity**
- 17. Family**
- 18. Friends**
- 19. Job**
- 20. Allowance**
- 21. Communication**
- 22. Social passing**
- 23. Library**
- 24. Extracurricular**
- 25. Social programmes**
- 26. Library**
- 27. Peer exchange**
- 28. High school**
- 29. University**
- 30. Teacher**
- 31. Courses**
- 32. Policy**
- 33. Standard**
- 34. Sponsorship**
- 35. Community**
- 36. TYP**

## Appendix I

### Example of “Breakdown of Students’ and Teachers” Responses

Table A and Table B illustrate a breakdown of the students’ and the teachers’ responses into basic themes, organizing themes and global themes.

Some of the basic themes are so flexible they can be organized into more than one global theme. For example, communication could be placed under institutions as well as students and staff. Once the basic themes, organizing themes and global themes were identified, they were represented pictorially as a non-hierarchical web-like diagram or networks, hence the name thematic network. The thematic network maps are shown below in the section that explores the data findings.

Table A

*Breakdown of Students’ Responses into Global Theme (an example)*

Interview questions	Participants’ response	Basic theme	Organizing theme	Global Theme
“What social and financial support would make learning easier and success more achievable for you?”	Wapask: “ I don’t think I needed any more social support.”	Family	Family and friends provide strong social support	External Factors
	Mikisew: “I had a lot of support, maybe a little too much from my family. For education is very important in our family...”	Friends		
	Mahekan: “ I had family support”.	Job	Financial support	
	Atihk: “I was OK”.	Allowance		
	Mikisew: “ Finance was not a problem. But if I didn’t have a job and I was going to Askihk I think I would have financial problems”.			
	Amisk: “I got money from family, sponsorship and welfare. I was good”.			
	Wapask: “We had student’s allowances and it wasn’t very much, once a month. At least ...”.			

Table B

*Breakdown of Teachers' Responses into Global Themes (an example)*

Interview questions	Participant's response	Basic theme	Organizing theme	Global theme
"What are some of the constraints that teaches and students face in delivering the TYP on a reservation versus off the reservation?"	Bob Denard: "Access to the professors from the city university who lecture in the computer-based teaching"	Poor university communication	Teachers	Institutional Factors
	Arne Bronte: "Last term in English the students didn't even know how to contact the profs in Winnipeg"	Library	Resources	
	Bob Denard: "Sometimes the performance itself falls because we don't have the same supports (as the universities). We have different supports... because our staffing and budget is so much smaller"	Extracurricular activities		
	Bob Denard: "Lack of a library. There are no books, online journals ..."	Social programmes		
	Arne Bronte: "... and there is also the social aspect. They don't have an Aboriginal club..."			
	Bob Denard: "Extracurricular activities have to be done with the high school students"			



## **Appendix J**

### **Managing the data**

1. focusing on the 'how' or 'what' aspects of the phenomenon
2. focusing on the referential (meaning) or structural components of the categories of description;
3. focusing on similarities and differences within and between categories and transcripts associated with particular categories;
4. attempting to resolve or understand mismatches or inconsistencies between the interpretations of different researchers involved in the project;
5. focusing on borderline transcripts and those transcripts in which there are aspects that do not fit the proposed categories of description; and
6. looking for the implications for all the categories of description of a change in any one category.

(Bowden & Walsh, 2000)

## Appendix K

### Sample Responses

Table 2. Sample Responses for the theme external factors

<i>Basic</i>	<i>Organising</i>	<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Sample Response</i>
Family/ finance	Social support	Atihk	"I did not have to leave the community. I did not have to leave my family. I got money from family, sponsorship and welfare" .
Job	Financial support	Wapask	"I was working at the gas station, which gives me unusual hours so I didn't get time to study. I was no longer getting money from the band or and my mom didn't have it you know".
		Mikisew	"Without the stipend from the band I had to support myself the second time round by working odd times in the community".
Extra- curricular		Mr. Denard	"... there is also the social aspect. There is nothing in the community to promote social building and leadership...".

Table 3. Sample Responses for the theme student factors

Basic	Organising	Interviewee	Sample Response
Motivation	Readiness to learn	Amisk	"I am motivated for sure because upon completion I would get sponsored. I can achieve my dream of becoming a nurse and not have to leave the community and you know what I can get sponsorship while I am still here".
Choice	Professional aspiration	Wapask	"I actually didn't have any career goal at the time. I actually didn't know what I wanted to go into or why I started it. My parents and community wanted me to ...".
Diversity		Mikisew	"I want to do something in Aboriginal education but there is not much taught here not even Aboriginal history so I was bored cause I didn't like the other subjects".
Success/ failure	Expectations	Mr. Denard	"They are not committed. I don't want to say, not blanket, because we have some very good students...".
	Work ethics	Ms. Bronte	"They failed to hand in their papers on time and their attitude to work in general was not up to standard".

Table 4. Sample Responses for the academic adjustment theme

Basic	Organising	Interviewee	Sample Response
Spoon-feeding	Teaching styles	Mahekan	"...there was all these deadlines and you had to follow it through. It showed how university is and how you had to do all the studying by yourself. As adults it is basically what university is".
Homework	Time management	Amisk	"At first, I thought that the courses were easy and I it was just like high school basically. I started to procrastinate, the work piled up and I almost failed the first semester".
Course challenges	Culturally relevant	Mikisew	"So, I did not do too well. I think it would have been better if they like... if they got us together to see what our interests are like Aboriginal history and Cree for instance".
Writing assignments	Difficult courses	Maskwa	"It was hard to keep up with all the essays and stuff that they were throwing at us because I didn't really understand most of it".
Course challenges	Culturally relevant	Bronte	"The computer base is one model which they charge us for which is least effective. For most of the course we have no access to the professor ... we are nine hours away. We are not going to visit them. They (the students) don't even know what the prof. looks like".
Readiness		Denard	"They need more time for preparation – to do homework. They think learning time is only in the classroom. And you know university – all the learning is taking place outside of the classroom".

Table 5. Sample Responses for the theme institutional factors

Basic	Organising	Interviewee	Sample Response
Teacher	Programme design	Atihk	“Yeah, the teachers are good. I liked the teachers and they helped me...”.
		Mahekan	“So, it was an eye-opener as to what postsecondary work is...the teacher just lectured and couldn't answer my questions. I had to find ways such as YouTube or my high school teacher ...”.
University	Other institutions	Mikisew	“In comparing the TYP with the city university, umm...I like that they had Cree – a Cree course there, and Native studies ... There was no variety here to choose from”.
Library	Facilities	Wapask	“I guess I wanted more one on one with the teachers and a proper library with materials”.
		Denard	“Another problem – library. Like, where are the stacks? Where can you see books? There are no books”.
Social Programmes	Facilities	Bronte	“Say, if someone is dyslexic for example, at the university they would get the supports. But we don't have this specialization at Askihk”.

Table 6. Sample Responses for the theme sectoral factor.

Basic	Organising	Interviewee	Sample Response
TYP	Leadership decisions	Atihk	“The fact that the programme is in our community makes it better for us. We are near our family and we receive a stipend every month”.
		Denard	“Before the TYP at [...], the dropout rate was 95%. For that, it was phenomenal having the college on the reserve”.
Teacher	Programme design	Bronte	“...they get one-on-one contact with us, because our class sizes are smaller. In the city there are hundreds of students in a class ...”